



Lethal discoveries

A novel by Erica Pensini

Science sans conscience n'est que ruine de l'âme (Science without conscience is nothing but ruin of the soul) – François Rabelais

I have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness – Allen Ginsberg

Born like this

Into this...

...The natural effect of general decay

And there will be the most beautiful silence never heard

Born out of that

The sun still hidden there

Awaiting the next chapter

-Charles Bukowski -

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Disclaimer : This novel is a work of phantasy. All references to institutions, people and places are purely coincidental.

Chapter 1

It was 7 p.m. and the only people around were Brad and I.

I was ready to leave too, half frozen as I was. It was steaming hot outside but I couldn't tell. Winter or summer, the thermostat kept the temperature at a constant of 23 °C in the perfect cosmos of FoodTech labs, the ultimate generation facilities for engineered food.

My goal there was to find a way to foam pudding. Use half the amount of ingredients, find a way to boost the volume and you've got it all: pudding cheap for the consumer and profitable for the industry. For the last three months I had been trying to synthesize a polymer that could do the trick when added to the pudding. Inexpensive pudding for happy people, this is what I was after.

Ok, not exactly. I didn't care about the pudding, the people or the food industry. I just wanted to find the polymer for the sake of it, because it was a challenge, a game if you will. There was no ethics and no real life involved as far as I was concerned: it was just about me, my polymer and my air-conditioned, mint white, neon lit world. You find this squalid? I was hired to make cheap pudding because money is what makes the world go round. I never set these rules, so I chose to forget them. Someone wanted cheap pudding, I wanted the fun of making it for them. You'd call this a win-win deal. Wouldn't you?

Today I had finished producing a new batch of polymer. The jars with the different puddings were nice and ready in the rack waiting for a small dose of my polymer.

"Still not ready to go?", I heard at my back.

That was Brad. Our homes were 5 minutes away one from the other and we carpooled almost every day.

"I want to try this new stuff on the pudding", I said without turning, "Just stay here, will you?"

He came around me, lifted the bottle containing my polymer and looked at it against the light. "Ehm, nervous?", he asked with a smile, "I failed again today. No luck at all lately".

Brad and I were running for the same elusive goal. "Well, what about we give this a try", I said, starting to inject the polymer in the pudding.

"Why not", Brad laughed, "What else should we do on a Friday night?"

Nothing else but try our luck once more, I suppose. And fail, of course.

"Ah, here we go again", I sighted.

Brad and I looked at each other.

He shrugged, "Come on, it's Friday night. Who cares about this crap anyways?"

We both did, and a lot too. But Brad was right, it was time to let go. When the automated doors opened to the outside world a wall of thick moist air wrapped around us, starting to warp the disappointments of the day.

"Brad?", I said, stopping in front of his car

"Yes?", he replied, eyebrows slightly arched and hand on the door handle.

“Can we have dinner somewhere? It would be too depressing to go straight home”.

We ate and drank to our failure, and by the time I got home the polymer seemed a bit less important.

Chapter 2

Once I got home I made some lemonade for myself and sat on the on the chipped steps of my old house’s porch, barefoot, sipping my drink slowly. Traces of the sunset were still streaking the darkening sky, where deep purple clouds floated in the moist summer air. The heat enhanced the odours, filling my nostrils with the smell of pine and cooking lingering around my neighbour’s house. I could hear the kids’ hushed voices followed by laughs, fragmented at first, then loud and uncontrollable. It felt good to be sitting on my porch, taking it all in, slowly. I stood there a while after the house next to mine fell silent, and all I could hear were the cicadas, singing their lullaby somewhere in the night.

After the owners of the house had passed away, their kids had decided to rent out the place for cheap, in exchange for a few renovations. I had done most of them myself during the week-ends, repainting the walls and fixing some windows. I had wanted the house not so much because I could stay there almost free, but because I needed to sleep under a roof drenched with life and history after spending my days in the aseptic atmosphere of FoodTech labs. I had found refuge in work during a difficult moment of my life, using it as a tool to turn away from real problems, to limit my horizons to a model world where things were simple and problems were like the buzz of a fly in the summer, of no consequence at all. I had always been a diligent kid, but after that critical moment in life I became addicted to work in a way that I realized was unhealthy, without really wanting to change it. I had the runner’s high, so to say, and it felt good in some perverse way to keep it up well beyond exhaustion.

And yet in the last months something had shifted slightly within me, although the change was imperceptible from the outside. The hole that had been carved in my existence that winter of 1991 was still there, I could keep it silent for a while but it would wake me up in the middle of the night, now and then, leaving me lonely and disarmed. What I had shyly started to admit in the last months was that I needed more than work therapy in life. I had grown up in a small town where everyone knew everyone else. There were about one hundred households, one bakery that also served as coffee shop, one grocery shop, one tiny theatre and a school, and a large chemical factory that employed almost everybody in the town. I think that I became who I am at least in part to honour my father, who was an engineer in that factory. In 1991 I was 11, and I had moved to NY to live with my grandmother. The change had been huge, neighbours barely acknowledged each other and making friends in the block where I lived seemed impossible. I slowly socialized with some of the kids at school, and after some time I began seeing some of them during the afternoons, every now and then. But overall I became a solitary girl, spending most of my time in the library or doing homework at home. Things could never be again as they had been before NY, and I can say without too much bias that the beginning of my adulthood coincided with the day I moved to the Big Apple.

When I walked back inside the house the darkness felt too thick and a familiar pang of pain grabbed my guts. I turned on the lamps and took a shower. The water started off cold, as usual, but the air was hot and I didn’t really mind. By the time I was done the anxiousness had subsided. I found the book I had left

on the kitchen table and walked to my bedroom upstairs, the stairwell squeaking under my weight. The cicadas were still singing, and a full moon was glowing through the open window. The night felt maternal now, and I fell asleep with my lamp on, the book slipping away from my hands.

Chapter 3

The next morning I woke up with the sun, the dawn spreading its pink and velvety tints across the sky. The block was still asleep and I drank my coffee on the porch in the silence of the morning, broken only by the slow, reiterated whine of my old rocking chair.

There was a lake close to my house where I would swim early in the morning, often before going to work. The water was chilly and it was painful to dip in, but after a few minutes making laps the cold would become almost unnoticeable and after half hour I would emerge from the lake feeling optimistic and pacified with myself. I went back into the house to leave my cup in the kitchen, grab my bathing suit, a towel and the car keys.

When I turned on the ignition Wooster rushed out of my neighbours' backyard, running towards me. Wooster was a black Labrador who made its way to the Wheeler's house as a puppy one year earlier, carried in the arms of their over-excited kids, shortly after I had begun working at FoodTech labs. The Wheeler's had mounted a swinging door on the back, from which Wooster would come and go as it pleased. The town was small, Wooster would never go too far and everyone knew it was the Wheeler's dog anyways. I had brought Wooster to the lake a couple of mornings, and after that it had gotten into the habit of joining me whenever it heard my ignition start at my typical swimming hours.

I drove in the woods with Wooster on the front seat beside me, head tall, scrutinizing every detail on the way as my wonky third or fourth-hand Buick made its way on the unpaved trail. When we reached the lake the colours of the dawn hadn't yet faded and they mirrored on the smooth surface of the water, flickering with reddish-pink reflections.

I laid my clothing on a rock and tested the water with the tip of my foot. Wooster looked at me, waiting for me to go in first. I carefully walked in the lake, holding up my arms to avoid contact with water for as long as I could and finally I plunged in, followed by the dog. Wooster would swim with me for a while only and then find his way back to the shore, shake the water off and sit waiting for me to return.

When I got back home I found a brown paper bag in front of my door, accompanied by a good morning note written in stylized print. Unmistakably Jack's. The muffins in the bag felt warm and their smell made me salivate. I walked inside with my muffins, smiling. Jack had moved to California after working in all sort of trades across the States and finally decided to settle there few years earlier, after opening a small bakery. He had started off by working alone 7/7 for ten hours a day, but when the business had begun to thrive he hired a local boy to help him out with the shop.

Back then I couldn't tell for sure what was the nature of Jack's feelings for me, but I knew he liked me and he did for me things he didn't do for the other people in the town. By the time I showered and had breakfast the sun was high in the sky and the air was turning hot. Suddenly I missed the ocean, driving along the coast with the car windows rolled down and eating in one of those restaurants by the beach. I

thought I'd go find Jack and ask him to join. I drove to his flat at a leisurely speed, taking the time to observe what was along my way, the trees, the trimmed gardens, that old lady with her dog and that man talking to himself as he read the news.

Jack's flat was one storey above the bakery and could be accessed from the back of the building through fire stairs, which I used as if they were the regular ones when I wanted to see him. When Jack opened the door and saw me he smiled, looking as if he had been expecting the visit, and asked me if I had liked the muffins. I said I did, and then we both fell silent for a moment. Neither of us was a fast talker. When I asked him to come with me for a day on the ocean shore he looked at me strangely. Which beach did I want to go to, he asked me. Any beach, I said. He wanted to know if I would you mind spending a day fixing a boat. For a friend who needed a hand, he added. The idea of restoring old relics always pleased me, and when I said so Jack smiled, I think more at the way I phrased my thoughts than at the concept itself.

"Just give me a moment to put on a shirt and I'll be back", he told me, before disappearing into the house.

For some reason he didn't let me in that day, so I waited beside his truck and a few minutes later we were heading to the highway, making our way to Mission beach.

Chapter 4

We drove for a long while enjoying each other's presence and the endless blue of the sky, without saying a word, just smiling at each other every now and then. Then we reached a semi-arid stretch of land, burnt dry by the sun of California, and seeing the thirsty earth I began to long for a drink myself. When I saw a gas station that sold ice and pops I signalled Jack to stop.

"So, who is this friend you told me about?", I asked him as we got back on the road.

He told me I needed to have some patience and looked at me like someone who has in store a surprise prepared for months and does not want to spoil it. Jack was not one to reveal himself easily, and I didn't know much about his past life. He communicated with greater ease when his hands were busy, and most of what I had learned about him was from comments he had dropped casually as we were working together, fixing some broken part of my house or baking. I had been behind the scenes at his store several times, and I remember thinking that there was more science in what he did in his bakery than in what I did in the lab, and more simple and honest joy too. But even then whichever information he released was brief and enigmatic, not because he deliberately wanted to keep things from me but because of his reserved nature. He was not the type who liked to be at the center of the scene, and was better at listening than at talking. I wasn't a great talker myself, but when I got started I could go on for quite a bit, drilling into the details of what I wanted to say till I felt I got my story straight. So Jack had learned more facts about my life than I had about his, although I think I knew him as well as I knew me. I tend to sense people, and I don't really need facts to tell who they are.

When we were close to Mission beach we turned into a residential road and stopped in front of a house with a low white fence and a wealth of florid plants covering the whole yard with the exception of a

white pebbled walkway leading to the door. There were wind chimes hanging all over the porch, where three plump cats lay on large cushioned chairs and a chaise longue, lazily looking at us with eyes half closed as we rang the bell.

A man opened the door, and when he saw Jack he laughed, and took his hand bringing him close to his chest at the same time, patting him hard on the shoulder as they hugged.

“Come on in lad, come on in”, he said and then, looking at me, “I see you’ve brought a nice lady with you”.

I smiled politely, introducing myself. The man’s name was Fred. Fred was no longer young when I met him but he had a solid frame and lively manners, and his dark blue eyes were inquisitive and warm at once.

The wallpaper and the furniture in the house were pastel colours and I could tell that there was a woman living with this man. Books were all over, and there was a thick stack of them on the coffee table in the living room.

I looked at the titles and while I was trying to create a mental profile of the Fred’s interests he told me, “I study marine biology. Theoretically I am a retired professor, but I still show up in my old labs a couple times a week”.

He laughed and added, “I can’t let go”. I told him he had no reason to. I wondered how Jack had met this man but it seemed out of place to ask at that moment, so I kept my curiosity to myself.

It was almost lunch time and Fred proposed to fix us something to eat, simple sandwiches, he said apologetically addressing me more than Jack, since his lady was away and he wasn’t much of a cook. Then Jack excused himself to the bathroom and I was left standing in the kitchen as Fred sliced the bread, strangely caught between the embarrassment of letting him do the work while I watched him and having to ask him what I could do to help. Fred must have sensed my state of mind, because he turned around and told me that all he needed from me was that I sit down and help myself with a drink from the fridge.

“Have you know Jack from long?”, he asked after a moment, and I was surprised at the question.

He listened to my answer and then said, almost talking to himself, that it was time Jack found a girl. At that moment I had the distinct feeling that something had happened to Jack in the past, and that Fred had been there to witness it. I returned the question I had been asked when Jack walked in. Fred looked at Jack with complicity and said, placing a hand on his shoulder, that they had known each other for quite a bit.

Chapter 5

After lunch we loaded the tools and the paint on Jack’s truck and we headed to the shack where Fred kept his sailboat. I felt there was a tension in the air, something unsaid, and Jack’s silence felt different from usual. The boat was covered with a dark plastic sheet, which was cracked here and there and was caked with sand and dust as if it hadn’t been touched for a long while. Jack stood there, holding the

bucket of paint, looking at it. I caught Fred leaning on the door of the truck with the toolbox in his hands, observing Jack from a distance. I approached Jack and when I spoke to ask him if it was long since the boat had been used he started, as if he had forgotten that someone else was there. It would have been two years in a month and a half, he replied, and the way the answer had been phrased, the accuracy of it, surprised me and I was sure there was something with this boat only Fred and Jack knew. I nodded, and waited for Jack to decide what to do next. He seemed confused though, and in the uncertainty he kept where he was, with the bucket in his hands, until Fred touched his shoulder from the back and said, "Come on lad, let's get started".

When Fred removed the cover I noticed that the tree was cracked and that some of the wood on the keel was also damaged. We worked till dusk patching the wood, and by the time we finished putting fresh paint on the boat I was so hungry my stomach hurt and my back was sour from being bent for hours. I let myself lie on the sand, still warm from the day's sun, and rapidly slipped in the limbo between sleep and wake, losing track of time, while Jack and Fred reloaded the truck. It must have been just a few minutes later when Jack knelt beside me and gently touched my back, whispering that it was time to go.

"I don't want to", I said, "just let me stay a bit longer".

Jack laughed, and began lifting my arm. I was still sleepy as the car made its way back to Fred's house, and I could feel the dirt sticking on the sweat that had turned dry and cold. Fred looked at me from the rear mirror.

"Maybe you guys should just spend the night here and head back tomorrow morning", he said.

Jack turned around and I smiled, trying to look very much awake. He shook his head laughing and said we would probably accept the offer.

When we got home Fred's wife was there, and the house was filled with a smell of roasted mushrooms that made me salivate as soon as we opened the door.

"Ah, it was about time!", she yelled from the kitchen when she heard the door open.

She hugged Jack and then studied me briefly, before tending me her chubby hand and smiling maternally.

"You must be hungry", she told us and was pleased by my answer when I replied I was starving.

She let us wash rapidly before hurrying us to the table, which she had set up so that it was a pleasure to the eye, with the food beautifully arranged, the flowery tablecloth and the artsy dishes. The shower and the food did me good, and brushed off the weariness of the day. Anita was a small, rounded lady, whose chatter compensated the minimalistic style of the conversation her husband, Jack and I used to have when she was not around. She was younger than Fred and was still working as a Spanish and French teacher, as she told me, before asking me what I was doing in life. I intended my answer to be brief, but ended up going into much detail. For some reason Fred was intrigued by what I did, and started asking questions when his wife's attention had begun sliding away.

Jack listened without speaking, but at the end he said, "So, this is what you do".

I had never told him much about it because I didn't believe it mattered to him. When I said so he asked why, looking hurt.

After dinner we sat in the living room, chatting for a while longer, while the cats cuddled one on Anita's lap, the other on the back of the easy chair where she was sitting. But soon I begun feeling dizzy, and I was relieved when Fred said that he would call it a day and head to bed. There was only one guest room in the house and I shared the bed with Jack. We had never shared a bed before, but that night I was too tired to wonder if it was a strange thing to do so.

Before falling asleep I asked, "Why were you offended before?"

"Offended?"

"Offended that I said I didn't think you cared to know the details about my job", I explained, although I was sure he knew what I was referring to.

"Fred was my PhD advisor, you know? But why don't we just go to sleep now, it's been a long day", he said.

I was suddenly awake, but I knew that Jack needed time before he could tell me more.

"Good night Jack", I told him, and fell asleep shortly after, feeling so very happy to be there.

Chapter 6

When I opened my eyes Jack was looking outside, leaning on the windowsill. I observed him for a moment, still not fully awake from my dreamlessly placid night, and then I pulled myself halfway up, resting on my elbows. Jack turned around and we smiled at each other for a moment.

"Slept well?", he asked me.

So well, I replied, that I had no clue of what time it was. Jack found his watch on the drawer, it was almost 7. I wondered if Fred and his wife were up already and if we should start getting ready or if we should stay in the room a bit longer, waiting for them to start their daily routine before moving around the house and making noises. I had a habit of waking up early and never lingering in bed, but at that moment there was a peace within me that I hadn't felt in a long time, and I was reluctant to leave the room.

Jack turned to the window again. I was resting my head on the pillow and I had closed my eyes, when Jack began talking.

"I had just graduated but I was still working with Fred. We were collecting sediment samples for Lisa's thesis. She was in her third year, and I was helping out with her project. She was Fred's student too. Fred used to laugh about how his lab was better at producing couples than research, and how this would happen over and again to his students. Getting together like Lisa and myself, I mean. I didn't notice there was something wrong at first, we were browsing different areas of the seabed. And when I did notice, it was too late. The oxygen cylinder was faulty, she started swimming back up too fast".

He said all this talking slowly but continuously, with a controlled voice.

“How was she like?”, I asked.

I know there is a comfort in recounting memories, in the possibility of having someone you’ve loved relive through a shared recollection.

“She was like you, as I first saw you the first time I met you. After knowing you better I learned that there is a melancholic side to you that she did not have”, Jack said.

I understood then what had driven Jack’s initial closeness to me, before knowing anything about me. It is strange how whatever one loved or hated first ends up by marking that person’s life so deeply, leading to new relationships that are somehow linked to the past. Nobody can ever escape the past, we carry it within us no matter how hard we try to leave it behind.

“What about the boat?”, I asked.

“Fred had been there on the boat waiting for us to come back with the samples, and he had tried to intervene when he realized what was happening...but when they pulled her up it was too late.

Jack had spoken giving me the back, but now he rubbed a hand across his face, turned around and said, “There goes Fred watering the lawn”.

He walked around the bed and gave me the hand.

“What about leaving the bed?”, he said with a smile shaded by sadness, pulling me up.

Chapter 7

When I walked to the kitchen Jack was already sitting at the table, chatting with Fred, and Anita was fixing our breakfast. Jam was on the table, and the room was filled with the smell of coffee and toasted bread. I thought that it must feel good to live this way, waking up every morning on a shared breakfast in a paid-off house just minutes away from the beach. My life seemed miles away from those standards, and I wondered what it would become many years from now, when I reached Anita’s age.

Anita saw me standing on the corner, and invited me to the table. “Did you sleep well?”, she asked.

When I told her I found the atmosphere of their place soothing Fred smiled, “I’ll have to go check few things in the lab, but if you guys are willing to stay a bit longer we can bring the boat for a stroll”, he proposed.

I would have wanted to accept the invitation, but Jack spoke before I did.

“Maybe another time, I think we should be heading back after breakfast”, he said. He looked down for a moment before adding, “We’ll be back”, and I was surprised that he had counted me in as if it was natural that when he was to come back I would be there too.

When we hit the road I felt the lightness that takes over after a long holiday, when one is hung up in between realities, suspended between the usual routine and the atmosphere of the vacation. The perception of my body was odd too, as if I was thin and floating. I let Jack drive and I indulged myself in the blurred lines of my sensations, watching the landscape race by.

By the time we reached my house I had fallen in a state in between wake and sleep, and I was surprised when the car came to a halt. When Jack turned around and thanked me I felt there was something else he wanted to add, and we stood there lingering in the moment a while longer. But then he just thanked me again and I walked to my door, waving at him before disappearing into my old house.

Chapter 8

I was sitting on the porch with a lemonade and a book when the phone rang. I reluctantly got up to my feet to answer it and when I picked up the receiver I heard Christine's voice on the other end. She was one of the few friends I had made in New York, where she still lived when she was not roaming somewhere around the world. I had met Christine in high school. She had then become a journalist working her way up from small magazines all the way to the Times. She aimed high and she got it, being good at what she did, but her 13 hours working days and her continuous travels had made her personal life a mess. In spite of the distance I think I was one of the major certainties in Christine's life, the same way she was in mine, which was, in a different way, just as messy as Christine's. It was good to hear her voice. She asked me how I was and asked me to go see her. Then she spoke about her next trip. But all along I felt that she had something in store and from her tone I anticipated what she was up to.

When I told her she laughed. "I am so much in love. But this time I really want to be careful, I want to understand if we are really meant for each other. Experiences teach, right?"

I had heard this before and couldn't help smiling, "I wouldn't love you so much if you weren't crazy", I told her.

We spoke for a long while about this new man, who was supposedly wonderful and different from all the others.

The phone call changed my mood, and by the time I hang up I was itching for some movement. I would have wanted to go for a swim or a walk, but for some reason my body felt weak. I realized I was very hungry although it was only 5 pm and my lunch had been quite abundant. I made myself a sandwich and nibbled it while playing with Wooster, who had come to greet me carrying a ball in his mouth after coming back from a walk with the Wheeler's kids.

My thoughts were as remote as they could be from FoodTech labs when the phone rang again. This time it was Brad. Could we go to work earlier than usual the next day, he asked, and I said yes.

"I want to pin this polymer business down", he told me.

The week-end had brushed away the frustration, and the idea of trying something new, first thing in morning, energized me. My hopes were high again, and I fell into sleep planning the next day and rolling ideas in my mind.

Chapter 9

On Monday morning the highway was almost empty and the drive felt good. The building in which Foodtech labs were encased sparkled in the morning sun, the blue of the glass bright against the cloudless summer sky.

We scanned our passes at the entrance and signed in. We scanned our passes to use the elevator and then again, before entering the labs.

“I want to test something else. I’ve come up with few thoughts yesterday night, but I am not sure how to put them in practice”, I said. “What about we try them together?”, I proposed.

“Sure, I have some ideas too and I have the same problem”, said Brad. We were a good team.

Alice showed up early too that morning. “What are you guys doing here at 7 am”, she teased, leaning on Brad shoulders and mine.

“We couldn’t wait to see you and we got up before sunrise”, Brad replied, winking.

“Oh yeah, you bet!”, Alice laughed.

“Are you up for lunch?”, I asked her.

“I thought the boss would order pizza for everyone today, no?”, Alice wondered.

“True true...I almost forgot”, I said remembering the boss had decided to organize a “pizza social”, as she called it.

“See you guys then”, said Alice, squeezing our shoulders, “I don’t feel like working but I suppose I should. My cell cultures are waiting for me”.

“So, what’s next?”, asked Brad after Alice had left.

“Let’s go get the precursors and then I’ll tell you”, I said, walking to the fridge.

Something had leaked out. “What is this?”, I said, opening the door and turning speechless.

“Holy smokes!”, Brad almost yelled, “Are these your samples from Friday?”.

The volume of the puddings in which I had added the polymer had swollen by at least ten times, popping the caps open and melting in a multi-coloured foam, which now slowly poured from the bottom shelf.

“It worked!”, I yelled in reply, incredulous. “What do you think the pudding will taste like now?”, I asked.

“No clue...”, he replied.

We looked at each other for a moment. “Ok, it’s against the rules, but...”, I said, taking my gloves off. Brad took his gloves off too. There were cameras everywhere, but not in this room. I dipped my finger in the vanilla pudding, while Brad went for the chocolate pudding. The pudding had a vague acidic back taste, but that was no matter – in this industry adding more sugar is never a big deal if you can save on all the rest.

“Why don’t we use the confocal microscope to look at the 3D structure”, Brad suggested.

“That’s what I was thinking too”, I said, taking the vanilla pudding and wiping off the jar the foam around it.

I spread a thin layer of vanilla pudding in the microscope cell and waited for the computer to start. When the software finally opened and we could get an image what we saw was stunning. There were spherical shapes all over, which had not been there earlier. And there were holes, arranged to form identical patterns at different scales.

“Fractal structures. I never saw anything like this”, said Brad, eyes fixed on the screen. Then he looked at the image more closely. “But look, even where there are no voids the material seems changed”, he told me.

I approached my face to the screen. “Yeah...you are right”, I whispered.

“Let’s increase the magnification”, Brad said, as he operated the microscope.

There were tiny dots, we couldn’t really tell what we were looking at but we knew for sure that those dots weren’t there before.

“Something is telling me that these polymers are doing something more than repelling the pudding around them”, said Brad. “You think they have changed the bonds between the pudding molecules?”, I asked.

“I can’t tell yet, we have to do some infrared spectroscopy to know”, Brad replied, “But hey Iris, you are a genius!”.

“I am! But I am a genius with no idea of what is happening”, I laughed.

Chapter 10

The infrared spectroscope was in another part of the building, connected to our department through a glass corridor from which we could see the parking lot. Dr. Mc Murrich was stepping out of her car just then. High heels, black suit, died hair tied back tight, she was impeccable as usual. Mc Murrich was the director of our research division at FoodTech labs. She was the one who would buy us pizza today, for the social lunch. She had been a top notch researcher back then, before becoming a manager. She didn’t have the appearance of a researcher anymore, but that is perhaps inevitable if you climb up the food chain. Mc Murrich was good at doing what she did, we could tell because we always had money to play our games in the lab. We produced the work and she sold it for big bucks to international brands in the food industry, so that they could make even bigger bucks. We all had our share of joy. You’d call this a win-win deal. Wouldn’t you?

“She’ll be excited, what do you say?”, I said.

“You bet she will, this is the breakthrough of the century”, Brad replied.

Brad had a large lanky frame, longish hair and big black-rimmed glasses screening his blue gaze, usually somewhat absent. But now his eyes were electrified as he looked at the jars. We began scanning a

sample of pudding with no polymer in it and the spectrum appeared on the screen, with peaks and valleys, each one the signature for a chemical bond. All expected bonds were there.

“Ok, no surprises so far”, I said, “and now let’s have a look at what Mr. Polymer did to the pudding”.

Brad and I sat close to the screen as the spectrum appeared.

“What are these peak here?”, I said.

“I don’t know”, Brad replied. “And look, the peak that was here before is gone now”, he said pointing at the screen, “It’s amazing that the polymer could break chemical bonds and form new ones”.

“Well, we should use some other techniques here. There’s too much guessing involved in reading this spectrum”, I said.

“We should try to get Mike to have a look at this first”, Brad told me.

Rough manners, long nails and beard, same thick sweater and spectacles worn year-round, strong body smell: that was Mike, the spectroscopy guru. Mike was the most senior member in our team, and we all liked him. Mike’s shell was ugly, but he knew his business and he’d share his knowledge generously if you brushed him the right way.

When we knocked on Mike’s door it took him a few minutes to answer. “Yes”, we heard at last.

“Mike, it’s Iris and Brad, do you have a moment?”, I said through the door.

No reply for a minute. Then the door opened, and Mike’s displeased face appeared. He walked back to his desk and brought his face close to the screen, without saying anything. Brad and I looked at each other. Not a good day, we thought.

“Mike”, I began, “we saw something very interesting today. I mean, *very* interesting”.

Mike turned around slowly.

“Iris added a polymer to the pudding and it swelled by at least ten times”, explained Brad. “The structure we saw under the microscopy was completely different from the original one. We went to look at the infrared spectrum of the pudding and it’s not the same anymore, the chemical bonding seems to be affected by the polymer”.

“Changes in the chemical bonding don’t happen just because you add a polymer in the food”, Mike said drily.

“That’s what we think too, but we cannot understand the spectrum”, I said, in an attempt to get around Mike’s bad temper.

“I can have a look at the spectrum”, Mike conceded at last “but I am swamped. Mc Murrich asked me to summarize the work we have done in the lab in the last ten years, so she can talk about it in one of her conferences”.

So that was it. Mike hated the industrial conferences where Mc Murrich advertised the golden standards of our labs.

“The empty nonsense of industrial politics”, Mike grumbled angrily between his teeth, walking with Brad and me to the infrared spectroscopy room.

He dragged a chair close to the computer. The spectra were on the screen, one beside the other. Mike looked at them in silence, rubbing his chin. We stood still behind him, waiting for his oracle.

“I don’t understand this”, Mike said after a long while.

Brad and I looked at each other in disbelief. If Mike didn’t know, nobody else would.

Mike kept looking at the screen, and now his nose was almost touching it. “The bonds between the carbon atoms have changed”, he started, “But something happened to the nitrogen too. Based on this spectrum one would say that the proteins in the pudding aren’t the same anymore, as if they have been broken down in some way”.

“I tell you, the pudding looked very strange under the microscope”, Brad reiterated

“This is incredible”, said Mike shaking his head, almost talking to himself, “So what is the structure of your polymer?”.

“I started off with a standard azo compound, polymerized it with hydrocarbon and organofluorine compounds to get longer chains and then cross-linked them at 40degC. I wasn’t sure what I was doing and what I would get, I didn’t expect this at all”.

“Ehm...”, Mike hummed, “we should run some nuclear magnetic resonance tests on the samples”.

“But we can’t do nuclear magnetic resonance here”, I said.

“They have it at the research center for cancer. Remember we were there some time ago?”, Brad reminded me.

Brad and I had been there a couple years earlier to use their electron transmission microscope, but there hadn’t been much collaboration going on with their research center after that.

“I have a friend working there. I’ll give him a call a see what he can do for us”, Mike told us. Then, looking at his watch, “I’ll try to catch him later, he’s probably gone for lunch now”.

That reminded me of the social lunch. It had slipped my mind completely, what we were seeing was much too intriguing for me to care about something else now.

“I suppose we are due for lunch...”, I snorted.

Brad shrugged, “I suppose so”.

“Enjoy”, said Mike ironically, “and come see me after lunch”.

Chapter 11

Brad and I were standing in a corner talking on our pizza slices when Mc Murrich approached us.

“How are you guys doing here?”, she asked, “You seem to be having a pretty intense conversation”.

Brad and I looked at each other.

“Well, one of the polymers we synthesized the other day seems to work well”, I began, “Very well in fact. The volume of the pudding increased by about ten times”.

Mc Murrich arched her brows.

“Ten times?”, she asked, looking vaguely skeptical.

“Yes”, Brad confirmed, “we were surprised too, but that’s what we got. We can’t understand what happened though”.

Mc Murrich was intrigued, I could tell she was even if she never conveyed too many emotions.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this earlier?”, she asked frowning.

Then she smiled her professional smile, “You should have, this is great news”.

“So you are trying to understand what happened?” she asked after a pause, and then, without waiting for an answer, “Come see me in the next days and tell me what you find”.

We finished the pizza and went straight to Mike’s office. His friend at the cancer research center offered to see us that same afternoon.

“Sandeep is a great guy, you are in good hands with him”, Mike told us, “I hope you’ll find your answers. This case is fascinating”.

Mike’s face had brightened as he spoke, but it abruptly turned gruff like it had been when we knocked on his door in the morning.

“I need to work on the review now, I am swamped with this nonsense”, he complained shaking his head.

Brad and I thanked him and promised to come back with whichever new discoveries we would have.

Chapter 12

I had picked Brad up in the morning, so we went to the cross cancer institute using my old Buick. There was no AC in my car, and we drove through the summer heat with the windows down and the breeze blowing on our faces. I felt as if I was taking a holiday, driving out on a Monday in the middle of the day. I loved the feeling, it seemed to me as if I had the freedom to drive back home anytime, and that I had chosen to go and analyze the samples for leisure.

But when I entered the cross cancer institute the cheerfulness froze on me like cold sweat after a bad dream. It wasn’t the appearance of the place as much as what I knew happened in there. In the elevator there was a woman on a wheelchair, so thin she looked like she could break anytime. I tried to focus on the numbers lighting up as we moved from one floor to the next. When we reached the fifth floor I had to squeeze past the wheelchair to get out, and I felt guilty without knowing why.

When I stepped out I stood staring at the signs directing to the different rooms, without really reading them.

“This way”, I heard Brad saying, and I followed him to Sandeep’s lab.

When the guy came to open the door for us I slipped back in my role, and became aware of the polymer samples I was carrying.

Sandeep was a trim guy with courteous manners and a mild Indian accent. I could see why Mike liked him. He didn’t speak more than necessary and seemed to dose every gest, limiting all he did to what was strictly functional to his purposes.

The machine we needed was in a separate room, divided from the main lab by a glass door. I had never seen a nuclear magnetic resonance device this size before. To place the sample in the chamber Sandeep climbed on a stair, while Brad and I looked at him from below, fascinated.

“The analysis will take a while to run”, he told us after starting the machine, “if you have time to come back tomorrow afternoon we can discuss the results then”.

I was disappointed to leave, I would have preferred to sit there, one, two, three hours, whatever it took to know what had happened to the pudding and then go home happily owning my piece of information. When I told Brad he laughed, and said that he had a better idea.

“Do you have more polymer?”, he asked me.

I said I had plenty.

“Well, since this worked so well on the pudding we should see what it does to other foods”, he proposed, “Pull up at the next grocery shop, there’s one few blocks from here. Let’s get a bunch of food types and see what it does to them, just for fun”.

I hadn’t thought about it, and the idea thrilled me. To us this was a game and we wanted to score on at least another three items. We picked yoghurt, ice-cream and tomato sauce. Tomato sauce was my idea. Brad was skeptical about it.

“You’re asking too much”, he told me, “tomato sauce has to be heated and at that point your polymers will change completely. People will buy a liter of sauce and will end up with nothing after they warm it up for their meal”.

I insisted that it was worth trying and we bet a pasta dish, seasoned with tomato sauce.

Our mood had turned light and happy after leaving the cancer institute behind, and after setting up all our samples with the polymer we left earlier than usual. There was nothing else we could do other than give the polymer time and hope it would do some more magic.

Chapter 13

After dropping Brad off I didn’t drive home directly. I stopped by the grocery shop to get myself some food at the deli counter and drove to the lake. I had my dinner looking at the reflections in the water, with the moon and the sun simultaneously suspended in the brightness of the sky. I wanted to stay there until the sunset, but it was still early. I wished I had Wooster with me, time would have passed by easily throwing rocks in the lake for him to fetch. I hadn’t thought about bathing when I got there and I

didn't have a bathing suit with me. A bath seemed to be perfect though. I took off my shoes and felt the water with my toes. I had a look around and there was nobody in sight, so I stripped off all I was wearing and plunged in the lake. The water was warm and silky around my naked body, and I swam slowly for a while, then let myself float on my back, eyes closed. When I turned on my belly and opened my eyes I saw a figure sitting on the shore, close to where I had left my clothing. I panicked and calculated the distance between where I was and the opposite side of the lake, but then I thought I couldn't reach home without first getting a hold of my clothing and my car. When I looked more closely I realized the figure I was seeing was a kid. I wondered what she was doing there all alone, since there weren't any houses nearby, not that I knew of at least.

I checked my watch and noticed that the time was past 8, and I thought the kid should have been home already. I lingered in the water, hoping she would leave soon. But after 15 minutes she was still there and I was getting tired, so I swam back, uncomfortably looking at the little girl staring at me as I moved closer to the shore.

When I was close enough to touch the bottom with my feet I stopped, not knowing what to do. The girl kept observing me, and finally smiled and told me that her name was Mirth. I told her mine before adding that my clothing were right beside her. She looked at them and nodded. It was all very strange, but suddenly it began to feel as if it wasn't at all, and I climbed out the lake, naked as I was, and started dressing.

"What are you doing all alone here?", I asked once I finished putting on my clothing.

She told me that she did so whenever her mother was doing a night shift, which happened at least twice a week. "It's not all that wasn't safe to go around like this", I said, and she shrugged and pointed out that I was swimming alone in the lake, naked. I laughed at this. The kid must have been nine or ten but she was sharp in a calm way that made her seem older than her age. I asked if she wanted a ride back home and she shook her head no, saying that her dog would pass by in a while, and they'd go home together.

"But when will your dog come?", I asked.

"Before it gets dark", she replied.

I wasn't too sure about the story and I didn't want to leave the kid behind, although it was probably true that she had done this many times. She seemed too chill to be lying.

"Well, if you don't mind I'll stay here for a while longer to wait for the sunset", I told her.

We sat there in silence, watching the air burn with the multi-colored passion of the dying day. Then the red ball of the sun sank in the lake and the sky went dark, and the dog was still not there.

"I really don't think you should walk home alone, it will be very easy for me to drop you off at home", I told Mirth.

She shook her head no as she had done earlier, and so I sat there, not knowing what to do. But after a while I heard a noise coming from the trees around the lake. Mirth stood up and spread her arms,

yelling “Billy!”, and then a dog appeared, trotting happily toward the kid. After greeting Mirth Billy sniffed my feet, and gave me a wag when I touched its head.

“Will you ride us home?”, the kid asked.

Chapter 14

We got on the car and Mirth guided me to the road that led to her house. She told me that there was a shortcut in the woods, from which her place could be reached by foot in only fifteen minutes, while getting there by car required taking a number of detours up the hills.

“Does your mother know you walk out to the lake every night?”, I asked while we drove along a narrow street that seemed to lead nowhere.

It seemed strange to me that a kid her age was left alone at home like that. Mirth began to tell me that she had a baby-sitter coming over before and that they would always walk to the lake after dinner, around this time. Billy had learned that they walked back home once it got dark, so he would walk to the lake, then wander around the woods for a while and join them when it was time to leave. Then she stopped talking and looked out the window, narrowing her eyes. I briefly turned around to see her expression, before shifting my attention back to the road. The asphalt ended and after about a kilometer of unpaved road we found Mirth’s house. I stopped the car.

“Your babysitter is gone now”, I stated, feeling that something had happened to her.

Mirth nodded. “Mom is a cop. Amy didn’t show up one day and then mom found her floating in the lake”.

This must have been on the local newspaper but I never took the time to read it, so I was completely unaware of the fact. The idea that a dead girl had been floating in the lake where I used to swim gave me the shivers. I imagined Mirth in the house alone with the ghost of her dead baby-sitter, and leaving her there seemed terribly wrong.

Mirth sensed my thoughts. “Someone is coming over in a short while, so don’t worry. I must go now, if the new nanny sees me out here in the car with you she’ll ask questions and I’ll get in trouble”, she said, opening the door and then letting the dog out.

I watched her walk to the door, with Billy trotting beside her. She turned around and waved, thanking me for the ride, then disappeared inside the house without waiting for my answer.

Chapter 15

I drove home haunted by a pungent sense of discomfort. It was certainly a coincidence, but I couldn’t help noticing that stories of drowned people seemed to follow me in the last days. This week-end it had been about Jack’s girlfriend, and tonight it was Mirth’s babysitter. I wondered why she had drowned. Had she felt suddenly sick? Had she committed suicide?

When I got home I sat in the car for a moment, not wanting to go inside. I was tempted to go see Jack and tell him about the kid, omitting the story of her drowned nanny. But then I thought I couldn't talk to Jack about Mirth without mentioning what happened to her babysitter, so I renounced altogether the idea of going to see him.

The steps squeaked beneath me and when I opened the door the house welcomed me with a sheath of darkness. I reached for the switch and turned the lights on the emptiness of the rooms. There are nights when being alone is a burden, and this was one of them.

The freshness of the lake had evaporated off my body during the drive, leaving me hot and thirsty. I headed to the kitchen and drank large gulps of water directly from the tap. Then I removed my clothing, the shirt clung onto my head, I stripped it off anxiously and threw it on the floor. My heart was beating quickly, I could feel it pulsing in the veins of my neck.

The shower slowly washed away the tension. I let the water sooth me inhaling the lavender smell of the soap. I stood there until I emptied the hot water tank and the shower went cold.

When I went to sit on the porch with a lemonade my mind was devoid of thoughts. I was still there, sipping my drink and letting the night drench me with the sound of the cicadas, when the phone rang. When I picked it up I heard Jack's voice on the other end.

"It's strange, because I wanted to call you but I couldn't. It feels good to hear your voice", I said, and was surprised at my own words.

"Why couldn't you phone me?", Jack asked.

I told him about the swim in the lake, and Mirth and her drowned nanny.

"I had read about the drowned girl, it was on the local news. She had felt sick on the lake, it seems like it's something she was taking. They thought it was drugs at first but then it seemed unlikely. I don't know what they concluded though. It's very strange how the case stopped being discussed abruptly. It was 'the local police is still investigating' one day and no news at all the next".

"So you knew...", I said.

"Yes, and that is what decided me to go see Greg and fix the boat", Jack told me.

There was a silence on the line, and I waited for him to go on. "I thought it was time to face the past", he added. There was another silence, then Jack asked me how I was doing with my polymers.

"We'll see how they work on other types of food tomorrow. This compound could be a real breakthrough for the food industry", I said.

"I thought someone like you wouldn't care about the food industry", Jack replied.

"I don't", I said, "but the fact that other people do keeps my business going".

Jack laughed. "So how do you guys test that the new compounds are safe before releasing them?", he asked, then added "Sorry for the biologist's question...".

I hadn't thought about this before. After all I was only combining polymers that were considered non-toxic, so why would I end up with something that was harmful? Who tested what we produced in our labs? I thought I would ask Alice the next day. She was the one working with bacteria all the time. Her job was to verify if compounds that prolonged the shelf-life of the products worked, all she did was make sure bacteria weren't there, but perhaps she could have some ideas on how to run some toxicity tests using my polymers.

"I didn't want to bother your conscience, I was just saying...", Jack told me when he felt the anxiousness in my voice.

"Why don't you come over?", I asked.

But he had to wake up at five the next morning to start the bakery. I hang up wishing him good night and went back on the porch. Jack's question kept rolling in my mind, and I felt the tension gradually ramp up till my heartbeat became so fast it hurt. It wasn't only what Jack had said, it was a combination of events and feelings I could hardly define.

I took my book and went to bed, trying to focus on my reading. The story drew me in, detaching me from myself a bit at a time. I calmed down, and fell asleep half an hour later.

Chapter 16

"Do we ever test the safety of the new compounds we come up with in our lab?", I asked Brad as we were driving to FoodTech labs the next day.

He shrugged. "Someone probably does, but I don't know how this part works".

"But who do you think would know?", I insisted.

"The boss, I suppose. Why does this worry you all of a sudden?".

I told him a friend had brought up the question and it made me wonder. The conversation stalled, and we drove in silence for a while.

Then Brad said, "I am curious to know what happened to our other samples. If the polymer worked with the sauce we'll have to try and heat it up. If you win lunch is on me. And if you don't...".

"It's on me", I interrupted, and we both laughed.

We got to Foodtech labs. We scanned the passes at the entrance of the building, we scanned them in the elevator to make it start, and we scanned them to open the door to the labs. Safety first, as always. We donned out lab coats and went straight to our samples. The sauce was just as it had been the night before.

"I suppose lunch is on me", I said shrugging, "but wow, look at the yoghurt!".

The ice-cream had doubled in volume, but what happened to the yoghurt was the most stunning part. It looked like a mousse now, and its volume was at least ten times greater than it had been the day before.

"It's soon to draw conclusions, but it seems like the polymer works only on products that contain milk", Brad said, almost talking to himself.

"I think we should do a systematic study. Why don't we try the polymer on pure milk?", I proposed.

We always had some basic types of foods in our fridge for our lab tests, and milk was one of them. "If we add the polymer now perhaps we'll see something before the end of the day", Brad said.

We were about to take the milk bottle from the fridge when we heard Mike on our back.

"So, what did Sandeep tell you?".

"We'll meet him this afternoon. Come see what happened to some other samples", I said, getting the milk bottle from the fridge.

Mike scratched his chin, thoughtfully. He took the jar of yoghurt and rolled it in his hands, as if seeing it from different angles would give him some new inspiration.

"Just by looking at this with the naked eye I would like to say that it has fermented", he said. "but there weren't any odd looking bacteria when you looked at this under the microscope, right?".

Brad and I looked at each other.

"I am not sure about what odd bacteria are like...", Brad replied doubtfully.

"Perhaps we can go get Alice and see what she thinks about this", I suggested

I found her preparing bacterial cultures next door. She was wearing an eccentric red and orange sweater under the lab coat and when she saw me she greeted me with a broad smile, bouncing on her chair as she said hello. It was good to be around Alice's halo of cheerfulness. We didn't get the chance to work together very often and I was happy I had finally found a reason to get her involved in what I was doing. When she saw the swollen ice-cream and yoghurt she raised her brows.

"Impressive", she said, and then began rolling the jars in her hands the same way Mike had. "Can I have a look at these under the microscope?".

She spread the yoghurt on a glass slide and looked into the eyepieces.

"Wow", she said, "what happened here?".

We took turns looking at the sample.

"The texture changed a whole lot, same as last time", Brad said.

"It's not only that", Alice told us. "There's bacteria in there. Loads of them. Do you see those spherical shapes all over your sample, arranged around the void spaces?", she said, gesturing to take another look.

"I see", I told her, my head bent on the eyepieces, "But they don't move at all. Aren't bacteria supposed to move around?".

“That’s right”, Alice said, “and this is what amazes me. These bacteria have multiplied like crazy, and based on their appearance they are very much alive, but they are not moving around as I would expect them to”.

“This business is more and more puzzling, I wonder what Sandeep found...but now these bacteria seem to be the key here”, Mike commented, rubbing on his chin as he had been doing since I showed him the samples.

“Let me keep the sample and have a better look at it”, Alice offered.

“We thought of adding the polymer to a milk sample...do you think you can have a look at it?”, I asked

“I have an idea”, she exclaimed, brightening up. “Why don’t you add the polymer and let me check on your sample in time. I am curious to know what these funky bacteria do before there’s so many of them around”.

I prepared the milk sample and handed it to Alice.

“I’ll be here till late, come back whenever you want this afternoon and I’ll let you know what I find”, she told me.

I thanked her, and said Brad and I would go find her after seeing Sandeep at the Cross cancer institute.

Chapter 17

I invited Brad to a Thai restaurant on the way to the Cross cancer institute to honour the bet I had lost with the tomato sauce. The ambience was homely and the waitress had soft features and a sweet smile. I am not the type who is very fond of restaurants, but I felt comfortable and became genuinely excited about the menu. Brad didn’t share my feeling, I could tell his mind was still focused on the work. “So, what do you think about all those bacteria in the sample?”, he asked as I was pulling up a nest of noodles on my fork. I shrugged and put the forkful in my mouth. “This is good”, I said, “I don’t know about the bacteria. It seems like the polymer helps them reproduce faster”. “Then why do they stop wiggling around?”, he continued, spooning up his soup. “I don’t know, maybe they ate all the yoghurt till their belly was full and when there was no more food around they decided to slow down”, I replied, laughing. I had said this as a joke, but Brad stopped eating and looked at me attentively. “You are right, they were all around the void spaces, weren’t they?”, he said pensively. He lowered his eyes for a moment, then looked at me again and said “But it’s not like there was no yoghurt left around the voids...”. I shrugged and said I was just making up a story. We finished our lunch without continuing the conversation, but I could tell that Brad was still thinking about it when we left the restaurant.

When we reached the Cross cancer institute I was surprised to find Sandeep waiting for us at the entrance. The eagerness to tell us what he found transpired through his composed manners. “I was waiting for you”, he told us. We followed him to the NMR lab, where he had left the computer on and the files containing the spectra from our samples open on the screen. “I was confused about these spectra, I found new compounds in the sample additioned with polymer, but I couldn’t pin them down”, he began. “So I took the freedom to show the data to a medical researcher here at the institute”, he

continued after a pause, "Wilhelm is a respected expert in the field". I had never been too secretive about my research, but I wondered what McMurrich would have thought about involving too many people outside FoodTech labs in our work. I must have frowned without realizing it, because Sandeep reassured me, "I know the data are strictly confidential, don't worry. Wilhelm will never disseminate them, you can trust him". I blushed at having been caught with untold thoughts on my mind. "So what does Wilhelm think about the spectra?", Brad asked. "They are similar to products of the metabolic activity of bacteria, but not completely identical to them", Sandeep said. We told him that we had tested the polymer on a yoghurt sample and we had found plenty of bacteria in there. "Ah, maybe it was the same for the pudding, that could explain a lot", Sandeep said pensively, "But as I said, what we found is not completely identical to the usual bacterial metabolic products. There seem to be some toxins in the sample too, although in very small amounts. Actually they are so close to the detection limit that I am not even sure about what we are seeing". We told him that Alice was monitoring a milk sample and analyzing bacterial colonies from the yoghurt, and that maybe she could come up with some answers. "You are more than welcome to bring me other samples to look at", Sandeep said, "I think it would be instructive to compare the compounds formed in different foods". We thanked him and promised to keep in touch, then headed back to FoodTech labs where we found McMurrich looking for us in the labs.

Chapter 18

"So, how is the polymer behaving?", Mc Murrich asked as soon as she spotted us.

"Quite well, I would say", I replied

"We've tested it on yoghurt and the volume increase was huge", Brad continued.

Mc Murrich smiled coldly. "Great", she said.

"We are trying to understand the mechanisms underlying the volume changes...", I began, but McMurrich cut me short before I could complete my sentence.

"Having that information would be great, but it is not essential", she stated curtly, "what we care to understand is if the polymer changes the taste of the food and its shelf life, once this is clear we are ready to launch the product on the market. There's more than one company willing to pay big money for it and I am keen on cashing that money".

Brad and I looked at each other. Mc Murrich had an outstanding talent for spoiling our fun whenever we were starting to have any.

"Should we test the safety of the polymer at all?", I asked, feeling Brad's reproachful side glance falling on my words.

Mc Murrich frowned, "You simply combined two polymers, both of which are safe. Of course the new polymer is going to be safe, why are you asking?"

"I was just wondering", I shrugged.

“Well, this is really not our responsibility. We simply sell a polymer that has the potential to boost the volume of the foods, the food companies should take full responsibility for any side effects it might have. We have disclaimers that exempt us from assessing this aspect”, she concluded.

“Sure”, Brad said wanting to end the conversation, “so Iris and I will be working with Alice to verify the shelf life of the products after adding the polymer”.

Mc Murrich nodded, “Very well, keep me updated” she said before shifting her attention from us to her monitor.

I moved to the door and said “Sounds good”, thinking on the back of my head that Brad and I would continue our investigation on the side. If we understood what happened we could get even better results. Why was Mc Murrich so greedy that she couldn’t see that? She was the boss though, and her strategies had kept us in the business so far – one had to give her that.

When Mc Murrich walked away Brad said, “So, let’s go see Alice, I am curious to know what she found for the milk”.

“And well, we’ll have to come up with a plan with her to get some answers for McMurrich”, I continued.

Brad shrugged. I knew this wasn’t his priority, but I also knew we couldn’t get the treat without using some tricks. If we wanted to have the fun of the discovery we should also invest some time to give Mc Murrich what she wanted.

Chapter 19

We found Alice in the cell culture room, looking intently through a microscope. She didn’t notice us walking in and she started when she heard me asking if there were any news.

“Look for yourself!”, she exclaimed excitedly, eyes strained but beaming, and a broad smile spread across her face.

Tiny dots wiggled in my field of view, crowding around the void spaces of what appeared like a foam.

“Wow!”, I said, making room for Brad so that he could see what was happening

“Is this the yoghurt or the milk?”, I asked

“The milk”, said Alice, “I’ve been monitoring the sample in time, what happens is very strange”.

Brad and I looked at her questioningly. The bacteria had multiplied quickly and had fast movements in the first couple of hours, after which they had begun moving very slowly, Iris explained.

“I bet that if we wait until tomorrow these guys won’t be moving around at all”, she said

“I wonder why...”, Brad said pensively, almost talking to himself.

“I would love to know myself”, Alice replied, looking again into the microscope. We decided to leave the bacteria to their own business till the next day and see how they would behave then.

“By the way, Mc Murrich wants to know if the polymer can change the shelf life of the products. Do you think the growth of these bacteria will affect it in any way?”, I asked

“I am still not sure”, said Alice, “These bacteria are probably like the ones usually present in the yoghurt, they shouldn’t cause the product to deteriorate”.

“So, what type of bacteria are in there?”, Brad asked

“This is the weirdest part”, Alice said, “I cannot recognize them. They are different from all the bacteria I know about. I also checked their characteristics against those of all the bacteria in the database. The best I can get is a match on about 90% of the features, but a perfect match is impossible”.

We stood there thinking this over. After a pause Alice said, “As a matter of fact I don’t think we should circulate the polymer out of the labs before we understand all this. We don’t really know what these bacteria can do to people, all we say with certainty is that the polymer triggers their growth”

“Oh oh”, Brad said, “Mc Murrich won’t be happy to hear this”

“We have to tell her though”, Alice insisted, and I nodded.

“But you heard what she told us today...”, he said, looking at me, “She wants to sell the polymer without worrying about possible risks”.

I was uneasy, for the first time since I took the job I fully realized that what we did in the labs could have an impact on real life and that I was trapped in a ruthless game where I was no longer controlling my moves.

“I’ll tell Mc Murrich anyways”, I said.

But when we walked to Mc Murrich’s office she was gone. Strange, I thought, Mc Murrich never left that early.

Brad shrugged, “Let’s leave this for tomorrow”, he said, “why don’t we just go home now”

I couldn’t wait to go myself. I wanted to leave the alienating atmosphere of the labs behind, go home, perhaps drive to the lake for a swim. But at the same time I was afraid to face the loneliness, to be confronted with the dead point where I had landed. I had been after this polymer for months, and now that I had found it I wished I never had. I had set in motion a mechanism I could no longer stop, and I knew that at this point I could not avoid that the polymer was released. Or maybe I could...I would have to wait till the next day to know.

“So, are we going?”, I heard Brad say.

I started, wondering for how long I had stood there, my thoughts wandering.

“Sure thing”, I replied, and we walked out, our feet leaving their imprint on the parking lot asphalt, melt by the burning Californian sun.

Chapter 20

When I got home there was a note from Jack under my door:

What about a night swim in the lake? J.

I found myself smiling, while I held the note in my hands. The handwriting was stylized, except for the J., which was curled and elaborate. I liked the contrast between the two handwritings. It was the first time Jack asked me out for a night swim, and I felt that with this request he was trying to resolve a knot within himself, perhaps unconsciously. Just one week ago we had gone out to restore the boat, and now he wanted to swim. I wondered if he was attempting to exorcize the death of his girlfriend by approaching the water again with me. *What links me to this girl? Why is he assimilating the two of us? Or is he? I want to know more about Lisa. I've always believed that there are connections between people that logic alone cannot explain. Perhaps Jack and I have met for a reason, perhaps I am somehow bound to Lisa and Jack is bringing us together. Nonsense, we are just going for a swim.*

I was standing on the door lost in these thoughts when Mrs. Wheeler waved me hello from her garden. I waved back. "Do you have a moment?", she shouted. "Sure", I said, and walked towards her house. When Mrs. Wheeler opened the gate of the low white fence Wooster came running towards me, and leaped up, licking my hands. I pat him laughing at his contagious joy, then looked up at Mrs. Wheeler smiling.

"I wanted to invite you over to our place one of these days", she began, "We have news to share"

"Which news?", I asked.

"Oh well, we'll tell you everything once you come over, if you have time of course", she replied, with a motherly smile painted on her face.

"I could drop by tomorrow...", I said tentatively.

"That sounds just perfect", she said overriding the doubts in my tone with the emphatic enthusiasm in her tone, her smile broadening, and walked away in her flowery dress, waving at me again when she was halfway to her door.

Chapter 21

I changed into a black bathing suit and a pair of old trousers, and drove out to Jack's place, with Led Zeppelin and Guns'n'Roses playing on the background. The heat and the old familiar notes had a soothing effect on me. After all the polymer hadn't been released yet, I was going to warm McMurrich the next day and tonight I would be swimming with Jack, leaving my work behind. Perhaps we could have something to eat together afterwards. I felt myself longing for this, life was good. I smiled, the breeze flapping softly on my face through the open window.

I parked on the back of the building and walked up the fire stairs. When I knocked on Jack's door I heard some stirring inside, and a long moment later Jack opened the door, his hair messy and wet, and a towel wrapped around his waist.

"I was steaming in the bakery", he said, answering my puzzled expression, "I couldn't drive with you sweaty as I was, even if we are heading for a swim".

I laughed at this and then, unexpectedly, I pushed him inside and looked at him from a distance, my hands resting on his shoulders.

"It's good to see you, Jack", I said.

He was silent for a moment, then said, "Yeah, it's good to see you too, Iris".

The room was filled with the soapy smell of his recently washed body and his green-flecked gaze felt fresh on my hot skin.

"Give me a moment", Jack said, and reappeared a few moments later with a pair of swimming boxers and a tattered shirt on.

"Let's go with my car", he said, grabbing the keys.

"Why?", I asked.

He shrugged. "No real reason, I just feel like driving", he replied.

Then he winked at me, and said "come on", guiding me towards the door.

Chapter 22

The fragrant aroma of the pinewoods flew through the open windows and I sat back, eyes closed, taking it all in. When I opened them I saw that Jack was talking glances at me, a smile on his face.

"This feels great", I said, turning my head towards him.

I closed my eyes again.

"Something was worrying me today", I said, and told Jack what had happened at work.

"You said that the polymer triggers the growth of unknown bacteria?", he asked puzzled. "I would come to have a look if I could, but I think the regulations wouldn't allow me to", he continued.

I nodded. "We'll keep monitoring the sample in the next days, and I will tell you what we see", I said in a conclusive tone.

I didn't really want to discuss the matter, but I had felt the urge to let Jack know. Now that I had I felt like a weight had been taken off me.

I hadn't focused much on the landscape up to that moment, and when I did I realized that we were driving on an unfamiliar stretch of road.

"I thought we were going to the lake", I said.

"We are", Jack replied, "Just wait and see".

After a few moments he pulled up in an area where the road broadened and Jack stopped the engine.

I arched my brows, smiling, "So?", I asked.

"So, let's go take a bath", Jack replied with a sly grin.

I tilted my head, pouting, my sense of orientation completely off key at this point. Jack laughed and jumped down from the truck. I looked around hesitantly, till I noticed a thin trail making its way through the woods. We were opposite to the shore where I usually swam, and seeing the lake from another perspective filled me with the amazed happiness that the unfamiliar vision of familiar objects brings about: like the clouds from a plane, the sky flickering across the leaves of a tree, a grain viewed under the microscope.

"I didn't know there was another road leading to the lake!", I exclaimed, and rushed towards the water, removing my clothing and making a hasty ball of them.

The coolness of the lake felt good on my feet. I was about to splash Jack with water when I caught a pensive look crossing his face, a veil of sadness cloud his eyes and go, like the shadow of a plane in the summer sky.

Jack saw my frown and said "This is the first place where I came when I moved here".

I stepped out of the water and took his hand.

"Come on", I said, tugging him gently.

"Do you want to swim all the way to the other shore", he asked.

It was a long swim and I hesitated, but Jack defied me, and so I began paddling fast, and raced besides him for a while then passed him, my muscles pushing and my blood throbbing, before I finally slowed down, out of breath. We were only halfway, so I turned on my back to rest to save some energy. Jack did the same, and we let ourselves float silently for a while, before slowly sliding through the water still separating us from the shore.

When we finally arrived I sat on the rocks, legs folded against my torso, my arms wrapped around them. I rest my head on my knees, smiling at Jack.

"Are you cold?", he asked.

"Maybe just a tiny bit", I said.

He stood for a while on a rock, staring at the lake, then said "I wanted to swim with you at the sunset since a long time".

I looked at his slim, muscular back without answering, feeling peaceful. The scene felt familiar, as if I had been there before or always knew this would happen. Jack kneeled in front of me, and cupped my face in his hands. I saw his green eyes come close to mine, then felt the roughness of his unshaved beard brush my face, and his soft lips touch mine. We kissed and plunged into one another, losing track of time, and when the sun began melting in the sky we swam back, enveloped by the scattered reflections of its multicolored melancholy.

Chapter 23

By the time we reached the coast I was hungry and my body was tired, but I felt a lightness of spirit and a peaceful joy that lifted the weight off my strained legs. Jack took my hand and helped me out of the

water, and guided me silently towards his truck. He had a towel in the back of the truck, it was crisp and smelled of fresh laundry. It had warmed up staying in the truck while we swam and it felt good when Jack rubbed me dry, gently brushing my face, and then making his way slowly down to my legs. I wanted him and I knew he wanted me too, but I appreciated his decency, his shyness, the fact that there was no explicit provocation in his gestures. When he finished I took the towel from him and began drying him the way he had done with me, then I wrapped it around his neck and pulled him close, till our noses touched.

“Where are we going to have dinner?”, I whispered.

“I’ve baked something for you today”, Jack told me, cupping his hand on my cheek and brushing his finger against it.

We drove to Jack’s place in silence, the landscape flowing on the background of his presence.

Chapter 24

We reached the top of the stairs on the back of the building and Jack turned the key in the door hole, but before opening he said, “Close your eyes”.

He covered my eyes with his hands, I heard the door squeak and open, and close again behind me. He guided me around and when we reached what I then figured was his bedroom he said, “Sit here for a moment, eyes closed. Don’t move till I come get you”.

I sat there, listening to the noises from the other room, and feeling around with my hands what seemed like wrinkled linens. I thought the bed was undone and felt the urge to check. I was about to open my eyes when I heard Jack shout “Make sure you don’t cheat!”, and laugh.

Finally he entered the bedroom and placed his hands on my eyes again, “Let’s go miss”, he said smiling, taking me to the kitchen.

“Ready?”, Jack said, taking his hands off my eyes.

There was a huge cake at the center of the table and all around it Jack had arranged dishes with sweet and salty finger foods. I was stunned and stood staring at the table in silence. Before I said anything Jack pulled a watermelon from the fridge, he had carved it and pink chunks of the fruit’s pulp floated in what looked like a cocktail.

“Wow”, I exclaimed at last, unable to add anything more.

I walked up to Jack and hugged him tight, my head resting on his shoulder and my arms laced around his waist, my eyes closed, till our sweat began to mix.

“Thank you”, I was able to add after a while, still holding on to him, rocking him slowly left and right.

“I didn’t wish you happy birthday earlier because I didn’t want to spoil the surprise”, Jack said, his gaze laid intensely on me.

My face went blank, I had forgotten it was my birthday, as I often had since a long while. I looked at the two storey cake on the table, with the frosting and the white puffs of cream on it, when it all flew back to my memory.

It was my birthday, the last one I would spend with my family, and my mother was wearing a red flowered apron.

“Hey Iris, what are you doing up there?”, she called out from the kitchen.

My father and brother were helping me put together the puzzle I had received as a present. I had fit in one last piece before running down the stairs. Seeing the cake I had stopped and gasped, before I burst out laughing and yelled “Woah!”. My mother had laughed too, and after my family had sang the “happy birthday” tune for me I had blown the candles, wishing I could find a kid I had met the previous summer in the compound where we could usually spend a week during the summer.

Tears pooled in my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. I didn’t wipe them, Jack did it for me.

“Hey...”, he whispered, lifting my chin

I began telling him my story. We had just come back from the campground and unloaded the car. “I suppose we should go buy some groceries”, my mother had said. Mrs Shaw was gardening her flowers when we were about to get in the car. “Welcome back”, she said, waving at us. “I have some popsicles if you want to drop by later”. The idea had got me really excited, “Oh yeah!”, I had exclaimed grinning. “You can have one now darling”, Mrs. Shaw said, smiling at my bubbly joy. When I looked at my mother she said, “We have to go buy groceries now, Iris”. “She can stay with me if she likes”, Mrs. Shaw had offered, smiling again. So my mother relented, “Well sure, if you don’t mind. We won’t be long, we’ll be back in half an hour or so”. But half an hour become one hour, then two hours and four, and I was still at Mrs. Shaw’s place. I knew something was wrong, but that night reality surpassed my darkest thoughts. By the time the sky had turned dusky and I was exhausted by tiredness and worry a police officer knocked on the door. He spoke to Mrs Shaw first. I was in the kitchen, but stepping out I saw she had brought a hand to her mouth, and was standing there gasping. Then the officer had me sit on the couch. He told me a truck had hit the car my father was driving, wiping off my whole family. I didn’t cry, I remember walking to my place, climbing up to my room and falling asleep. Drowsiness numbed me and I lost track of time. I wouldn’t talk or eat. By the time they found my grandmother and she flew from NY to Minnesota I was in the hospital, where they had hooked me up to a tube to feed me.

One day a new doctor walked in my room, carrying a book about an adventurous duck. He sat on my bed and read it, then he pulled out a chocolate spread and put some on my lips. “Nice lipstick miss”, he laughed. I licked it off, smiling after a long time. It was thanks to that doctor that I resumed talking and eating, and a bit at a time I recovered. After two weeks grandma brought me home, where we stayed till the end of the summer. When September was about to start she announced we would move to her place in NY, where a good school was waiting for me.

Chapter 25

Jack took my hand and sat me at the table, then he dipped his finger in the chocolate frosting. Holding my chin, he spread it on my lips and kissed them. We licked the chocolate off our lips at the same time, and laughed at our moment of childish joy. I got a knife from the old cupboard on the other side of the kitchen and cut off two large slices. The dough was soft with a rich taste, and I ate slowly, in silence, enjoying every bit.

After wiping the dish clean, I looked up at Jack and said, "This was heavenly".

"It must have tasted even better because you were starving", he winked, "I had a plan when I asked you to swim all the way to the opposite shore of the lake and back".

"That's wicked!", I exclaimed, laughing again.

Letting the past out and washing it away with long due tears had a liberating effect on me, and now I felt light as I hadn't had for years.

I chose some salty tarts and ate them voluptuously, with my eyes closed. Jack ate little, observing me with a smile concealed between the soft curve of his lips.

"We're doing this backwards", I said, licking the crumbs off my lips and brushing them off my fingers.

Jack arched his brows.

"We started from the dessert and we are ending with the appetizers", I explained.

"Ah well", shrugged Jack, "My life has been following a very random logic in the last years, and I've stopped worrying about the right order". "And talking about randomness, I want you to come see something", he continued, getting up from his chair.

In the bedroom, beside Jack's undone white and green bed there was a large box wrapped with newspapers and decorated with a rope tied up to form a rustic ribbon.

Jack pointed at the box and said, "Go ahead, open it".

"Oh boy!", I exclaimed, "What else did you get? I had even forgotten about my birthday...".

"This is something I had wanted as a kid and I know you always sit on your porch till late at night, so...we'll share this, it's not all yours", he said smiling.

I stopped unwrapping the box and glanced over my shoulder at Jack, who was wearing a vaguely mischievous expression on his face.

"Come on, keep going", he said, accompanying the words with hand gestures.

It was a telescope.

"We'll drink lemonade on your porch while we look at the stars", Jack told me with a satisfied grin.

This was so unexpected, I would have never thought of buying a telescope myself but now that I had one the excitement foamed inside me quickly and spilled out, "Oh wow!", I almost shouted.

We brought the telescope over to my place and mounted it on the patio I had on the upper floor. So far I hadn't used it much, preferring the porch for some reason, but now I would change this habit, I thought.

We stood out in the air filled with the voices of the cicadas, looking at the stars far away in the summer sky till past midnight. By then my eyes were sore and I said, "Let's go inside".

The wooden floor squeaked under our bare feet as we moved in the dark, to which our eyes had grown adapted by staying out in the night for so long. I leaned Jack against a wall, and began caressing him under the shirt, breathing him in. He had a smell of salt, as if he had been swimming in the sea, and the marine scent was mixed with faint leathery notes, the residues of deodorant and laundry detergent.

"I love your smell", I said, pulling up his shirt.

Jack's nipples were firm in my mouth, I licked them till he let out a weak moan and I felt his body shiver against mine. We explored each other slowly and let our desire climax in a memorably intense night.

Chapter 26

I opened my eyes around 5 am the next morning, feeling Jack silently glide out of the bed.

When he saw I was awake he brushed my brow with a kiss, "Keep sleeping, I have to go set up the bakery for the day. I'll call you later".

I moaned yes, and perhaps said something else I soon forgot, before closing my eyes again. When I reopened them it was almost 8, and I was terribly late for work. It was my turn to go pick up Brad that day, and I gave him a call that I couldn't be there before 8.30.

"Everything all right?", he asked.

I assured him it was and hang up. I was quite reluctant at the idea of going to work that day, I had no interest in seeing McMurrich's icy expression and talking with her, and I didn't have any more interest in the polymer either. McMurrich had made it clear that Brad and I would have to do the science on the side, since the priority was to answer what the boss needed to know to sell a product that had unknown effects. A product I had created and that I did not want to sell. I was dipping cookies in my coffee plunged in these feelings, when I suddenly found myself wishing that I could walk in the labs that morning and have someone announce that McMurrich was dead. For the fraction of a second I felt relieved, as if the fact had really happened, and I was astonished that relief was all I felt. I washed the coffee cup, showered quickly and drove to Brad's place, wondering now and then if the life I was leading was changing me in dark ways I could only catch glimpses of.

When I reached Brad's house I honked the horn and he came out few moments later, wearing a Hawaiian shirt.

"What's up?", I said when I saw him, pulling up one eyebrow and tilting my head.

Brad was usually pretty sober, his esthetic sense was as daring as the average engineer's, that is to say not very. I had buddied up with him for long enough to be fond of him and feel cozy when he was around, without ever considering him gifted with neither a classy or flamboyant taste.

"Why?", he said, trying to hide his smile and blushing lightly.

"I don't know, you tell me", I said, tugging the bottom of his shirt.

“What’s wrong with the shirt?”, he asked innocently.

I started the car, shaking my head and laughing.

“Ok, it was a birthday present”, he said after a few moments.

“Aha”, I said, “and from whom?”.

“You could start by saying happy birthday Brad, no?”, he retorted.

“Was it yesterday?”, I asked.

“Yes, it was”, he replied drily.

“Oh, I am sorry...well, happy birthday Brad!”, I said turning around with a broad smile, “You know it was mine too, and I had forgotten all about it”.

He looked at me perplexed. “Are you joking?”, he asked.

“No, not at all...and you forgot about my birthday too, so we are even”, I concluded, satisfied that I had stunned him.

“But you never told me about your birthday...”, he told me after a moment.

“Ah well, twin, I forgive you. So, who have you the shirt?”, I insisted.

“Why are you so pushy?”, he snapped, and then, after a pause, “A girl”.

“I thought boys were supposed to show off this type of thing, why are you shy about it?”, I winked.

“I wouldn’t have thought you could be so stereotypical”, Brad complained, “and in any case I am not shy, a friend gave me a shirt and I see no reason to either advertise it or hide it”.

“Uhm uh”, I nodded teasingly.

“So we should go see Alice this morning”, I said, shifting the conversation.

And that’s what we did as soon as we reached FoodTech labs. We found her in the culture room, already busy with our milk sample. She was in an excited state and gestured us to have look at what happened under the microscope.

“You were right”, I said, “the bacteria hardly move now”.

“Bingo!”, she exclaimed, “What is strange is that there is still some food around for them, so I don’t understand why their metabolism seems slowed down”.

“We could call Sandeep again”, Brad suggested, “maybe he can run some more analyses on this sample as he had offered to”.

“Sure”, I agreed, “in the meanwhile, do you guys want to go talk with McMurrich?”.

“Well, ‘want’ is an overstatement”, Brad said, “but I suppose we can”.

When McMurrich opened the door of her office and saw the three of us she raised her brows and said, “What can I do for you?” in a way that hinted a bitter mood.

We explained how the bacteria behaved, how they would multiply rapidly and then stop moving.

“Well, which bacteria are we talking about?”, she asked frowning.

“That’s the issue”, said Alice, “I cannot pin them down”.

“You cannot pin them down?”, McMurrich asked with genuine surprise, which surprised me in turn.

She thought in silence for a moment. “I have some contacts at the DNA Research Center, they might be able to help us find some answers”.

We were about to leave McMurrich’s office when she picked up the phone and gestured us to wait, raising the index finger.

“Hello Mark, this is Janet”, she said, “I would need somebody to run some analyses and I was wondering if you could help”.

The guy named Mark said something on the other hand of the line

“I have people in the office now”, McMurrich replied curtly, before explaining what we needed.

McMurrich’s expression was pleased as Mark spoke on the other end, although she smiled just the time required to thank Mark and hang up.

“Someone will help you tomorrow morning”, she said, “Bring your samples, all the ones you have, and the pure polymer too. They’ll need it to interpret clearly what is in your samples”.

She seemed ready to dismiss us when she added, “Ask for Mark Gill at the reception when you get to the center”.

When we left McMurrich’s office we looked at each other.

“I didn’t know McMurrich had friends at the DNA center”, I said.

Brad shrugged and Alice replied, “I didn’t know McMurrich had any friends. Jeez, that woman is sourer than yoghurt after its best before date”.

“You bet”, I said laughing.

Brad shook his head and said, “Ok misses, McMurrich is a bitch but should we try to call Sandeep and see if he can help us again or do we want to continue discussing our boss?”.

Alice and I looked at each other shrugging, and we went to our office to give Sandeep a call.

Chapter 27

“It’s great to hear from you”, Sandeep said on the loud speaker when he received Brad’s phone call, “I could meet you anytime today, but let me try to reach Wilhelm before we set a time. I think it would be helpful to have him there, I’ll call you back shortly”. And he did just a few minutes later, telling us to bring our samples in the afternoon.

When we got into the lobby of the Cross Cancer Institute my attention was attracted by a trim looking fellow talking with the lady at the front desk.

"I am from the press", I heard him say, "And I would like to speak with a doctor to ask few questions about your center".

Then Brad tugged my arm and told me we should get going, and I lost part of the conversation. Whatever the guy had said had bothered the lady at the front-desk, who was clearly alarmed now.

"No, this is absolutely impossible", she was saying.

"There have been quite few deaths lately, perhaps more than usual", the fellow insisted, "and all I want to do is have few words with the doctors who were in charge of the patients who passed away recently".

At this point Brad had also noticed the dispute, and we were both listening when the elevator's door opened and a doctor walked out.

"Good afternoon doctor, I am from the press", the journalist began, "I am wondering if you would have the time for few questions".

The doctor looked at the guy with a perplexed expression, but before we could hear the rest of the conversation Sandeep walked towards us,

"Sorry I kept you waiting", he apologized, "I wasn't sure if you would come upstairs or if you would wait for me here".

"Oh, we just came and were about to come up and find you", I assured him.

"So, you tried the polymer on other samples and they are also swelling", Sandeep said once the elevator started moving up.

"Yes", I confirmed, and then explained that the strange behaviour the unknown bacteria seemed to have was common to all the samples to which the polymer was added.

"Ehm, this is very intriguing", he commented pensively, "Let's have a chat with Wilhelm, he's upstairs waiting for us".

Wilhelm was a man who gave out the feeling of dryness. He was bald with little reddish-white hair on the sides of his head, and he looked at us with blue myopic eyes through a pair of rounded glasses balanced on his bony face. He shook hands with us without smiling.

"Sandeep told me about your case", he started, "I think we can analyze all your samples and compare the compounds with find. I also understand that you found unknown bacteria, the presence of which is interesting and can shed light on the results we obtained last time".

His voice was professional and calm, and shaded the uncanny feeling his appearance conveyed without completely dissolving it.

"You mean the presence of compounds which resembled the metabolic activity of bacteria?", Brad asked.

"Yes, for instance", he replied.

"And what about the toxins Sandeep mentioned last time?", I asked.

Wilhelm was silent for a moment, and I had the impression his features were perturbed by my question for the shortest moment.

"We cannot say much about that yet, the concentrations were too low. If you leave the samples with me I will investigate further and call you as soon as I complete the tests", he said, then asked, "Do you have some more polymer with you? I would care to duplicate the analyses on it, to ensure that the results are reliable. I would be able to complete the analyses in a couple of days".

I said we did and thanked him and Sandeep profusely for their help.

When we got downstairs the journalist was gone, and I wondered if someone had decided to take him somewhere to answer his questions after all or if they just kicked him out.

"It was weird, no?", I told Brad.

"The journalist, you mean?", he asked.

"Yeah, what he was saying about the fact that there had been a number of dead patients...I'm going to keep an eye on the local news in the next days, maybe they'll say something about it", I said.

"I must admit the episode was odd", Brad replied.

"And what about Wilhelm?", I asked

"What about him?", Brad echoed.

"I don't know, he is a bit spooky", I said.

He shrugged, "Don't be so sensitive, he's just a guy and all we want from him are some results".

"Ok", I conceded, comforted and annoyed at once that Brad was as always matter of fact and chill about everybody.

Chapter 28

I spent the rest of the afternoon browsing scientific journals for some hint to what could be the link between our unknown bacteria and the polymer. Scrolling one publication after the other without finding what I was looking for I was about to lose hope when I landed on a manuscript that attracted my attention. "The effect of chemicals on the genetic modification of common microorganisms: the case of E. Coli", authored by E. Livingstone and M. Mori. The researchers had isolated E. Coli from a mixed colony of bacteria and cultured two groups of E. Coli bacteria, which were initially identical. An petroleum derived organic chemical had subsequently been added to one of the two E. Coli groups:

"...upon addition of the chemical E. Coli bacteria were found to grow at a rate which differed from that of E. Coli bacteria not exposed to the chemical...Interestingly, when the chemical was added, the bacteria generated from the separation of the original E. Coli bacteria were dissimilar from the parent

cells in that they had a markedly distinct genetic patrimony...The reasons for these observations are not fully understood and require further investigation, which will be the object of our future publications”.

I turned around and called Brad who was also doing some research on his computer, “Come have a look at this Brad”.

He rolled his chair over to my desk and began reading, humming to mark his interest for certain passages. Then he got to the part that had attracted my attention, “Oh wow!”, he exclaimed, “You mean that the bacteria in our samples are mutants?”.

“Well, if you put it that way it sounds like we are talking about aliens”, I laughed, “but yes, maybe the polymer caused some changes in the bacteria naturally present in our sample, and this why Alice cannot find them in her database. Our buddies might very well be regular Joes with a new suit”.

“Aha, let’s go get Alice”, said Brad excitedly.

But the cell culture room was empty though. “Oh, she left...”. Brad was disappointed.

I looked at the clock, it was almost 7 pm. “Oh shoot!”, I exclaimed, “I have to go see my neighbours tonight and I should have already been on my way there!”.

I rushed Brad out of the labs, and sped along the freeway, the wind blowing on our faces and through our shirts, strangely inebriated as if at that moment I had infinite power and could climb the heavens, blow up FoodTech labs or drive back and work for the whole night for no other reason that I randomly felt one way or the other.

But by the time I pulled the car in front of my house my mood had changed as a desert sky, veering from sunny to cloudy and breaking out in a black thunderstorm. At once I was lonely in a terrible and absolute way, and I felt my guts tighten in a familiar way. Then I saw Mrs. Wheeler waving at me across her fence, so I opened the door and reached out the car, waving back and forcing myself to smile.

“Sorry I am late”, I said, “I’ll be there in a moment”. I climbed the stairs and called Jack.

“Jack”, I said, and paused.

“Are you doing fine?”.

“Yes...no...I mean, nothing is objectively wrong. I have to go see the Wheelers now...”, was my disconnected reply.

“Are you going to be there for long?”.

“Ah well, they’ll have me for dinner and I suppose I can’t leave right after stuffing myself with their food. They said they have some news to give me, so...”, I shrugged as if Jack were in front of me.

“You can drop by once you’re done with you’re done your neighbours”.

“Oh yeah?”.

“Sure”, he replied.

I was silent for a moment. “I’ll call you before heading to your place”, I said, the grip of anxiousness softening inside me.

Chapter 29

“John got a new job in Maryland”, Mrs. Wheeler told me after dinner when we were all sitting on the couch with drinks in our hands.

“Oh congratulations!”, I said.

“Yes, he will still be a detective, but the office is nicer”, continued Mrs. Wheeler, while her husband sat there taking in the news about his own job.

I wondered what she meant with that, but thought it would have been out of place to ask. “So you guys are going to move on”, I said instead, speaking directly to him, “when are you going to be moving?”.

One of their little ones, the girl, who was playing on the floor with a rag doll dropped her head, “I don’t want to go”.

“Oh honey, we will be just fine”, reassured her Mrs. Wheeler.

“In a month”, replied John answering my question. “We’ve already began to box up few things here but there’s always more than you expect when you start to put some order in your affairs”.

John laughed nervously and rolled the stem of his glass between his fingers as he spoke. I couldn’t understand why he was ill at ease, but he certainly was.

“I wish you all the best, although I must say that I am so used to having you people as neighbours it will be sad for me to see you go”.

“I am sad to go”, echoed the girl from her playground in a corner of the living-room. Nobody replied to what she said this time.

“I wish you all the best, really”, I reiterated, trying to chase away the odd vibes running through our conversation.

The room fell silent. We sat there with our drinks, each of us likely hoping we were elsewhere.

But then the boy rushed through the room with Wooster shouting, “It’s gigantic! Wooster dug a GIGANTIC hole in the garden”.

I laughed with relief at the boy’s bewildered expression and the dog’s muzzle caked with dirt.

“Honey, please call me if you see Wooster doing that again”, Mrs. Wheeler said, “We will have to sell this house and the holes in the garden will not look good”.

The boy shrugged and walked out.

“We’ll have to have another dinner before you guys leave”, I said, struggling to find the right words to end this evening.

“You bet”, replied Mrs. Wheeler.

“Thanks for the wonderful evening, I think I will be heading home now...”.

John gave me a nod and Mrs. Wheeler said, “Thank you for coming over, let me see you to the door darling”.

I shook hands with John, hugged Mrs. Wheeler and left. I was halfway to my door when I realized I would terribly miss Wooster.

The anticipated feeling of the loss burdened me as I opened the door, and walking up the stairs the loneliness sank in, and I found myself longing for Jack’s presence more intensely than I ever had before.

I dialed his number, nervously running my hand on the base of the phone.

“It’s me”, I said when he picked up.

“Your evening at your neighbours place wasn’t that long after all”. I could sense he was smiling on the other side of the line.

“I cut it short. I wasn’t in the mood when I got there and then things evolved in a very strange way...”.

“In a strange way?”, he asked.

“Yeah, Mrs. Wheeler told me her husband got a new job and that they will move to Maryland...”, I began and paused.

“And why is that strange?”.

“It wasn’t the fact, but the way they told me. John just sat there and Mrs. Wheeler did all the talking. The few times John spoke he was tense...I don’t know what’s going on in that family”.

“Why don’t you come over”, he said

“I’ll take a short shower and I’ll get there”. There was a moment of silence on the line. “I want Wooster”, I added.

“I don’t know about Wooster, but for the shower, well, you can have one at my place”, Jack laughed.

I laughed back, “Well, I suppose I should begin by taking what I can”.

There was another pause.

“Jack?”

“Tell me”, he said.

When the night swarms with buzzing insects and stars, when the heat soaks the bodies and makes emotions sizzle beyond our control, then words are of no use. All you have to do is be, shattered by joy, sadness, lust and sensorial madness, in the beautiful frenzy of a world you cannot understand.

“I will be there in five minutes”, I said, and hang up.

Chapter 30

The next morning I opened my eyes before Jack did. Pink light was already leaking in from the window. I turned around, not fully awake, and read the clock on the bed table. 4:58, *I am adjusting to Jack's schedule*, I thought, and turned off the alarm before it rang.

Jack stirred, moaned lightly and said, "Hey, how come you are awake?"

"Ehm, I am not", I replied, plunging my head in the pillow.

"You were talking in your sleep tonight", he told me.

I turned around, suddenly awake, "Was I?"

"You were talking about some bacteria, you were calling out Christine's name and then you said you had to get a plane, that you had to talk to Dr. Mori...I couldn't really follow".

"I said all this?", I exclaimed amazed.

I could recall details of the dream distinctly, and even now that I had opened my eyes it felt stunningly real.

"Yesterday I found a paper written by a guy called Mori...he found that the genetic patrimony and the growth rate of E. Coli changed if he added a chemical to the bacterial colony. Maybe this is what is happening in our labs, I told you my polymer is causing unknown bacteria to grow..."

"And so you want to talk to Mori?", Jack asked.

"Well, I didn't think about it till now, but why not? He could help a lot. I dreamed I went to find him, it was an unknown city I was walking in...it was pretty. I had almost missed my flight to get there..."

"And what about Christine?", Jack asked.

"Oh Christine...she phoned me some time ago, you know? I think I should call her back, just to see how she is doing. I probably thought about her because I saw a journalist at the Cross Cancer Institute the other day".

"A journalist? What was he doing?"

Jack was surprised.

"He wanted to talk with somebody, he was saying that there had been an anomalous number of deaths at the hospital, and he wanted to know more. Weird, no?"

Jack was pensive for a moment. "Yes, it is quite weird. You should show me the paper by the way, we could ask Fred for advice. He would be happy to help us if he can".

"Thank you", I replied, and then, "you know I don't want to get up?"

Jack laughed. "Then why don't you just stay in bed?"

"Because I am a good girl and I will make breakfast for you", I replied, throwing the sheets on the side and running towards the kitchen in a demonstrative attitude.

"What's with you since yesterday night?", Jack asked me from the bedroom.

I felt a wet warm gush between my legs. “My cycle”, I thought, finding the answer to Jack’s question.

Chapter 31

I got home before 7 a.m., and I thought I had more than half an hour before Brad would give me a lift to get to FoodTech labs. Christine was on the east coast, 2 hours ahead of me, she was likely at work, or heading there. Mornings are never a good moment to phone people to chat about life during week-days, but I decided I would give Christine a ring, just to know how life was treating her. She was still at home when I phoned her.

“Hey Iris! What’s happening for you at this hour of the day?”, she exclaimed loudly, her voice shaking my eardrums.

Then I heard some stirring on the background, and a male’s voice.

“It’s in the other room, give me a moment”, Christine said to whoever her guest was, and then to me, “Sorry, he couldn’t find his stuff”.

“I would like to ask you who “he” is, but I suppose it wouldn’t be nice to discuss the guy when he is there and you two just passed the night together”, I laughed, “I shouldn’t have called you so early...it’s just that I dreamed about you”.

“You dreamed about me? They all do!”, she teased, “And what was I doing in your dreams?”.

“I was discussing with you why people are passing away at an unexpected rate at the Cross cancer institute”.

Christine was silent for a moment.

“But is this really happening? I mean, are you sure about the suspicious deaths at the Cross cancer institute?”, she asked, her voice suddenly tense.

“I cannot be sure, but there was a journalist at the hospital the other day and he wanted to see someone, a doctor, to discuss this matter. Why, do you want to make a scoop?”.

The fact that Christine was taking me so seriously scared me, and I was trying to defuse the effect of my previous statement.

“Well, this is a very odd coincidence, you see, because in one of the cancer institutes here in NY the same thing is happening. The relatives of a patient called us, they were mad with pain at the loss of someone who, according to them, should not have died. I began investigating, and found that other patients who were not in critical conditions had died. I tried to speak with their families, some agreed to meet us, others just wanted to be left alone. Of course we couldn’t get much information from the doctors, they want to protect themselves and the reputation of the hospital so they keep us away as much as they can. I wonder if there’s a connection...”.

I heard again the male voice on the background, and then Christine’s, “Give me a moment sugar, will you?”.

“Perhaps we can talk more at a later time?”, I suggested.

“We should. I must go now, but I’ll call you back”.

Christine was shuffling something around as she spoke, then there was a thump on the floor.

“Shoot, my make-ups are all over the floor now! Ok darling, I’ll call you back, we must talk about everything including this story. Love you plenty”, she told me in her usual flamboyant and rushed voice, then hang up.

I held the receiver over the free line signal for a moment, thinking about what Christine had just said. I had a strange feeling about this whole matter, first the journalist at the Cross cancer institute, then my incredibly realistic dream, vivid in my mind even after I had awoken, and finally what Christine had found in NY. Something was just not right, although I had so little information that I could be making up the whole plot. I decided to postpone all thoughts about the subject and went to take a shower. It was so hot those days that unless one had AC – which was the case for all but anachronistic curiosities like myself -it was impossible not to shower at least twice per day. I let the water soothe me till it went cold, then I got dressed just in time to make myself another coffee. I was rinsing off the cup when I heard Brad’s honk the horn to let me know he was there.

Chapter 32

As soon as I got into the car I told Brad about my conversation with Christine.

“It sounds a bit creepy, I give you that”, he started

“But deep down you think I am making it all up”, I replied

“But at the moment you really don’t have any proof that there are connections between what is happening in NY and what is happening here and we can’t even be sure if the words you overheard from the journalist are reliable”, he concluded

From a rational standpoint Brad was undeniably right, but I felt there *was* a connection and the fact that I couldn’t prove it yet was no matter. I shrugged.

“Changing topic, I wonder what they will tell us at the DNA research center this morning. By the way, I thought about the paper I found yesterday”.

“And?”. There was a pitch of irony in Brad’s voice now.

“And my view is that we should really dig into this matter further, maybe contact the authors and see what they think about our case”, I replied, ignoring Brad’s skepticism .

“We can’t really contact outsiders and give out details about what we are doing”, he pointed out.

“Of course we can’t. Why do you always assume I am naïve?”, I retorted, and realized I had snapped for no good reason as soon as I finished the sentence.

“Well, I never said you are naïve, but I thought you just told me you wanted to contact the authors of the paper. So what do you want to talk about if not what we are doing?”.

Now the irony in Brad's tone was bluntly obvious.

I snorted. "Maybe I could tell them what we are up to without going into the details...and see if they believe that it is possible that some bacteria are changing on us. Ok, I see this doesn't make too much sense. And yet I think the author of the paper could be so helpful... In any case, I am going to see if they have any other publications on the subject".

"This sounds like a good approach", Brad replied, completely chill, keeping his eyes on the road.

I glanced at him and said nothing, knowing he was right but being unreasonably unnerved about it. I averted my eyes and looked out the window, in silence, till we reached the parking lot at FoodTech labs.

"Do you want to wait for me here while I go upstairs grab the samples?", I asked once we got there.

"Sure", he said.

I went to the labs and organized the samples quickly, placing them in a nice cooler like the ones people use for camping. I liked the feeling of carrying around the lab cooler, as if I was fully organized for some fun. I knew the emotion I associated with the cooler was an echo from all the summers in the campgrounds with my family, when I still had one. The realization that those good times were irretrievably lost should have saddened me, and yet all I felt when I had the cooler in my hands was a surge of infantine joy, even when what was in there was a bunch of samples we could not sort out. I was heading for the door when I heard McMurrich's voice on my back.

"Let me present you Iris, our scientist who is working on the polymer".

Two guys in full suits nodded at me, a smile on their face. One of the two was chubby, he looked like a good dad who played basketball on the backyard with his kids on Sunday. The other one was thin, with trenchant eyes that cut right through me as he smiled, and made me uneasy as if I was lying. I felt I was, although I hadn't said a single word yet.

I stuck out my hand. "Good to meet you", I said.

"We are making great progress in perfecting the polymer for your needs, and probably we can have a meeting with Iris in the next future to discuss its potential further", McMurrich continued, all professional smiles.

It was obvious that the guys were from some food company, but which one? I wish I could know, more out of personal curiosity than anything else. After all the polymer was my creature, perhaps a wicked one but nonetheless mine, and I cared to trace its destiny, wherever it landed. McMurrich's courtesy only went as far as her interests did, so of course she couldn't be bothered to inform me.

I managed to drown my negative vibes in a courteous and legitimate statement. "It's great to hear that you are interested in working with our polymer", I said.

"We are very keen on trying it out on our dairies, and then we could perhaps expand it on some other line of products", the chubby guy told me.

"Which other line of products?", I asked, deliberately looking at the thin guy. *Now I am going to dig you out*, I thought.

“That’s something we could perhaps discuss with you”, he replied, without flinching or attenuating the intensity of his gaze.

“It will be my pleasure”, I said, half as a courtesy and half as a challenge. *Why I am taking this so personally?*, I wondered, before remembering my cycle had started that morning and that my irritated mood had probably a lot to do with that. I excused myself and went to find Brad in the parking lot.

“Can you believe it?”, I burst out as soon as I got into Brad’s car, “McMurrich is still so much into commercializing the polymer even though we *explicitly* told her how odd are the bacteria it breeds!”.

“Relax, her job is to get people interested and commercialize the products we develop. It’s called creating job security. Now, let’s go to the DNA center and get the information we need. Can you pull out the map and help me find my way? I checked the street this morning but I could use a co-pilot”, Brad smiled.

“Sure”, I said, with a honeyed voice

I felt guilty that I had been so bitter with him earlier and glad I could have my small moment of redemption. If only I could be really help...*Focus*, I thought. I have always been terrible at reading maps, and although we had time we couldn’t afford losing our way if we wanted to reach the DNA center by 9.30.

Chapter 33

We were in the parking lot 10 minutes before our appointment. “Aha”, I said, “so we got here in time!”. Brad looked at me with an expression half amused half confused, and got out of the car without answering my inexplicable exclamation.

At the reception we asked for Mark Gill, as McMurrich had instructed us to do.

“Have a seat, I’ll tell Dr. Gill you’re here”, said the girl at the front desk. She was the kinky type that even the guys who feel very intellectual can’t help staring at.

I caught Brad taking side glances at her, trying to pass unnoticed.

“You like her, don’t you?”, I asked winking

“Are you jealous?”, he teased.

“Not at all, as a matter of fact I like her too”, I smiled slyly.

Brad gave me an amused look, shaking his head. I was about to prod him again when I saw a man walking towards us with a resolute pace.

“You must be Iris and Brad. Mark, pleased to meet you”, he said, tending us his hand.

His hand shake was firm and curt, and his clear blue gaze direct. There was something authoritative in this man, but he inspired my curiosity for reasons I could not fully define. He was the type who could be on top of someone like McMurrich, I thought.

He's her lover, I told myself without knowing why, and the idea fascinated me and revolted me at the same time.

"Why don't we go upstairs to the labs", he said, accompanying his sentence with a gest showing us to the elevators. The elevator we took was crowded, and we went up looking at our feet, in the embarrassed and vaguely claustrophobic silence that accompanies rides in elevators packed with people.

"This way", Mark Gill told us once we finally reached our floor.

The neon lit corridors gave out the same feeling of FoodTech labs: scientific, aseptical, efficient and completely impersonal. We stopped in front of a door labelled as "Flow cytometry lab". Mark Gill scanned his badge and we got in.

"You can leave your box on that bench", he told me, and then walked towards a bulky machine and said, "I suggest we start from here".

"We are looking at identifying some bacteria...", I began.

Mark Gill cut me off nodding. "Dr. McMurrich told me about your scopes. Flow cytometry will tell us if we have more than one type of bacteria. After we sort this part out, we'll run some assays to assess what are the main proteins in the bacteria present in your sample. How does this sound?"

"Great", I replied, feeling that this was the only answer someone like Mark Gill could accept.

"We appreciate your help", added Brad, who had been silent up to that moment, "please let us know when we can pass by again".

"Most certainly. We will have this done by the end of this week, I will call you once the analyses are completed".

I nodded with a smile that probably looked like the one of a good high-school student.

Gill headed to the door, "The elevators are down this hall", he said, giving us a second curt hand shake, "it was good to meet you".

We were silent in the hallway and in the elevator, not as packed as on our way up but with a couple of other hosts. When we reached the parkade I felt finally free to talk again.

"Whoh, what a man of steel!", I said as we walked to Brad's car.

This time Brad agreed, "Yeah, not a very easy one to talk to".

"I think he's McMurrich's lover", I said.

"He could very well be, they pretty much deserve each other", Brad replied.

I laughed, "I am pleased and surprised that for once you are not being so cool about someone".

He shrugged, "I am not cool, I just like to mind my own business".

"Which amounts to pretty much the same thing..."

The sun was up high and hot in the sky, and after about an hour in the parking lot Brad's red Hyunday was hotter than its color.

"I could easily use a day off", I said.

"You bet, but McMurrich will not give us much time at this point. We should show Alice the paper you found yesterday and see what she thinks, perhaps she will find some inspirations to solve our quiz".

"Sure partner, let's get going", I laughed.

"You're odd today", Brad laughed back at me, shaking his head and starting the engine.

Chapter 34

We were walking to the cell culture lab to find Alice when we met Mike in the hallway.

"I was looking for you", he said, with a weird expression painted on his face.

"Everything good with you?", I asked.

"With me?", he echoed my words, "For sure, everything is quite fine with me"

"Do you have the time to come to my office?", he added after a pause.

Brad and I exchanged a perplexed look, more for the urgency in his tone than for the question itself.

"Sure", Brad replied, "We actually have news that might interest you after our last investigations on the polymer".

Mike responded with an alarmed stare, and we stood there in the hallway for a moment longer till Brad arched his brows shaking Mike from his worried trance.

"I think you guys really ought to have a chat with me". Mike started to walk to his office and gestured us to follow. "Have a seat", he said when we got there, locking the door behind us.

"What's happening Mike?", I asked, sitting at the edge of the chair, leaning towards him across the desk, my hands joint. I had seen Mike in a bitter mood more times than I could count, but I would have thought anxiousness was unknown to him up to this point. Mike was a methodic man with certainties and a hard shell impervious to external perturbations. If Mike was in this state something must have been terribly wrong.

He looked straight back at me. "I don't know what is happening, but whatever it is, I suspect it is very ugly".

"Can you be a bit more specific?", Brad asked impatiently.

"Sandeep called me this morning. I could tell he was very nervous. His precise words were that under no circumstance we should bring samples to the Cross cancer institute, and most of all we should not carry any pure polymer there"

"But did he say why?", I asked, feeling my stomach tighten

“That’s what I wanted to understand too, but I couldn’t get anything out of him. He was scared, I tell you. I think he found out something and now somebody is threatening him. It must be someone who got a hold of your polymer, and wants to do something which is not so clean and fancy with it. Whoever the guy is, he must believe that there’s a lot at stake, or else he wouldn’t go so far as to threaten somebody. The question is who could be so interested in your polymer and why”.

“Wilhelm”, I whispered.

“Wilhelm?”, repeated Mike.

“Sandeep asked this guy, Wilhelm, to help with the analyses because the guy is supposed to be a super-expert”, I explained.

“Ehm, I see...”, said Mike, “But what would be using the polymer for?”.

“I don’t know”, I replied, “but the other day when Brad and I were at the center there was a journalist at the entrance. He claimed that the mortality among the patients had been suspiciously high lately, he insisted on talking with some doctor. He was gone after we met with Sandeep, I am not sure if he succeeded...”.

“It’s too early to draw connections”, Brad interrupted.

“Maybe it is, but something is obviously not right”, I insisted.

“I cannot see what our polymer would have to do with the death of some patients”, argued Brad.

“I can’t either and I hope the answer is nothing”, I replied, “but what are we going to do?”.

“Sandeep asked to send him an email saying that you’ve sorted everything out and that you will not need his help anymore, or whatever other story you wish to write as long as the conclusion is that he will no longer be involved with your work. He also asked that you don’t return to the institute and that you dismiss any possible offer of help coming from people who work there, “for everybody’s sake”, he said”, Mike told us.

“Maybe we should talk to McMurrich”, I suggested, “After all she must be made aware of this”.

“Not yet”, said Mike, “Let’s recollect our thoughts before taking any rushed decision”

Brad agreed. “McMurrich can wait. Let’s go visit Alice now, perhaps some of her new discoveries can shed some light on the mystery”.

“Ok”, I conceded in a half-hearted way.

I still had no clue that what was to come would surpass my imagination, but something told me that my lab games had slipped out of hands and that something real, and terribly wrong, was about to happen.

Chapter 35

“You guys don’t look too hot, what’s up?”, Alice commented when she saw us walking in the cell culture lab.

"We might be involved in something which is beyond our control..." , I began.

She looked at me with a questioning gaze.

"We went to the cross cancer institute the other day and Iris heard a journalist say that there is one too many deaths among the patients", Brad explained, "and she thinks our polymer might be in some way related to what is happening".

"But why do you believe so?", Alice asked me.

"That's right, so far there are no proofs for this", Brad replied to the question meant for me.

"Well, let me fill you in on what happened", I interrupted irritably.

"Please do", Alice said, her eyes bugged.

"Sandeep phoned Mike and told him that we should stop any collaboration with him, or with anybody in the institute. Mike said that according to Sandeep we should refrain from bringing there more samples for "everyone's sake". The man was scared when he made the phone call".

I accompanied my account with hectic hand gestures, and noticed Alice shifting her gaze from my face to my hands and back. I placed my hands in my pockets to try and stop them from floundering around.

"Also, a friend of mine, a journalist, told me that a similar story –the mysterious death of curable patients I mean - seems to be happening at one of the cancer centers in NY. Freaky, right?", I continued

"No doubt..." , frowned Alice.

"The question is: why would anybody use the polymer on those patients? And if someone did for some obscure reason, would it be harmful to the point of killing people?", Brad insisted

I could tell he was trying to fight the feeling that a nightmare was dawning on us, and that things had gone too far for us to do anything about them. He wanted himself calm, but I could sense the panic was starting to dwell in him too.

"I don't really know if the polymer can do this...and honestly if we want to figure this out I wouldn't be our best bet. I am not an expert on this", said Alice.

"Ok, but what is your gut feeling about this matter?", insisted Brad, and there was definite pleading not in his tone now.

"The best I can do is add some polymer to a colony of human cells and see what happens. Of course the cells can come from different organs, and I wouldn't know where to start...". Alice opened her arms in resignation.

"Can we try with blood cells? I imagine that we can get some easily just by poking our fingers", I proposed.

"This is a pretty naïve approach, but why not", replied Alice.

"Why is this naïve?", I asked.

"Because we are trying to approach the problem completely blindfolded. We don't know what the polymer did to people. In actual fact we don't even know if the polymer itself did something or if it's those funky bacteria that I still cannot pin down that messed up people's body", replied Alice.

She was about to add something when Brad's cell phone rang. His face became concerned, then angry.

"What do you mean everything is flooded?", he exclaimed

Someone spoke on the other end of the line, and Brad listened, shaking his head.

"Ok, I'll be there in about half an hour", he said, "Wait there, can you? Ok, thank you, I appreciate that".

He gave me a discomforted look.

"What?", asked Alice.

"Troubles never come alone", he said, "guess what now? My house got flooded. Some bloody pipe must have broken, the cleaning lady I hired just found out".

"You hired a cleaning lady?", I asked, amused in spite of the situation.

"Ah well, she comes once per month. I am a single guy, you know..."

"Ah", I replied expressively, "*Of course*".

"Ok, I'd better hit the road now", Brad said, and started towards the door.

The door was already closing on him, when he walked back in.

"Ah shit, but how are you going to get back?", he asked me

"I am a resourceful woman and I'll find a way", I smiled, "Now go! I'll phone you later".

"Thanks Iris", he said, and closed the door behind him.

"You actually gave me an idea", I told Alice once we were alone.

"That is?"

"You said that maybe the issue is not the polymer, but the bacteria it causes to grow, right?"

"I was just saying, I really have no clue...", she shrugged

"We cannot draw any conclusions, but this is a possible scenario", I insisted.

"Yes, I would say so", Alice conceded.

"I found a paper the other day", I began, and summarized the publication authored by Mori I had discovered the day before. Alice was shifting on the chair as I spoke, starting to say something several times and then cutting off.

"This sounds very much related to our case", she commented at last, her eyes vivid.

I could sense thoughts were crowding in her mind, although she couldn't formulate them as yet.

"I could try to contact this guy", I said, "ask him if he thinks new bacteria can harm people in some way".

“The question is too generic to be answered”, said Alice, “but how much information can we release? This is a huge dilemma...”

“I know”, I said, “and this is why I wanted to keep generic. But...I mean, there might be *a lot* at stake here, I feel there is. So screw it, I will start off by being a bit vague and will leak out more information if he gets back to me and if it seems like he wants to help. What do you say?”.

“I am not fully sure”, she said, “Should we talk to McMurrich? I suppose not...”.

“That’s right, I also proposed to discuss with her but Brad and Mike are against it”.

“They would also be against emailing this guy...Mori, you said?”.

“Yes, Mori. And yes, I suppose Mike and Brad would be against emailing him, but I can’t help myself now. In all honesty, none of us knows what to do but if we do nothing things might get very nasty.

“I am with you on this”, Alice said, “Go email Mori and I’ll run some tests using some of my blood cells. We’ll talk again before leaving. And oh, do you need a ride?”.

“That would be sweet. I don’t want to make trouble for you though...”.

“Don’t be silly, let’s get some work done and then drive home together”.

“Awesome”, I smiled, happily relieved that I wouldn’t have to go back in a taxi cab gnawing on my worries in loneliness

“See you in a while”

Chapter 36

I went to my desk, turned on my PC and pulled up the manuscript from Mori. It was two years old, and I hoped the contact information reported for Mori at the bottom of the front page was still valid. If it was it meant that the guy was working in Italy, I thought. My paternal grandparents were Italian, and I thought this was the n-th coincidence in the odd plot events seemed to follow in the last while.

I opened my mailbox, my hands sweaty, and began writing.

To: mori@centrosanit.it

Subject: genetic modification of common bacteria

Dear Dr. Mori,

I found your interesting publication “The effect of chemicals on the genetic modification of common microorganisms: the case of E. Coli”, which seems quite relevant to a study I am conducting. I have synthesized a polymer that is meant to improve the texture of dairies, and I am finding a significant amount of unknown bacteria in my sample. I was wondering if you ever probed the potential effect of

“genetically modified” bacteria on human health, and if you could refer me to any useful publication on the subject.

Best regards,

Iris Celati

I re-read myself once, and pressed the “send” button before I could change my mind about contacting Mori.

I went to buy myself a pop at the vending machines, and walked back to my desk, searching for publications, my mind elaborating thoughts at a frenzy pace for half of the time and too worried to focus or think straight for the other half. I closed my mailbox to try and reduce the number of inputs that rushed through my brain, but after half an hour I gave in and opened it again.

“What?”, I said out loud, pushing my chair so close to the desk my belly was squished against it and gluing my face on the screen. Mori had replied already.

To: icelati@foodtechlabs.com

Subject: RE: genetic modification of common bacteria

Dear Iris,

Thank you for your interest in my publication. I have indeed evaluated the impact of genetically modified bacteria on human cells. I have used harmless bacteria commonly found in the intestine and treated them using the same chemicals I had employed with E. Coli. Similar to E. Coli, these bacteria responded by changing their genetic patrimony. The paper is not in press, and will be released soon. The bacteria do not affect human cells of different organs individually, but it appears that they can affect the functionality of processes occurring in the human body in ways that I do not yet fully understand. Is the polymer you have produced in any way similar to the chemicals described in my manuscript?

Best regards,

Mauro Mori

I would have never expected the man to be so fast. I was happy, and yet I wished he gave me a bit more time to take in the idea that I was making contact with him, and that I was doing so in spite of my boss

and my mate not wanting me to. What he wrote wasn't comforting either. *Had the polymer really been misused at the cross cancer institute?*, I wondered. I felt a chill run through my spine. I had to go talk with Alice and had to force myself to walk, rather than run, to her room.

"Alice! You know what?", I exclaimed.

But Alice wasn't there alone. McMurrich looked at me coolly.

"You seem quite excited Iris", she said, offering me a tight lipped smile.

"I wanted to let Alice know that they are going to give us the results of the analyses by the end of the week from the DNA center...", I fumbled.

"Great. So is this what was making you so excited?", she asked, brows arched

I was never good at lying. McMurrich knew I was just making up an unconvincing story, but instead of insisting further she ignored me and addressed Alice.

"So Alice, please let me know what results you get with those tests regarding the shelf life of the products after polymer addition"

"Will do", said Alice with a nod.

"I shall let you have some privacy now, so Iris can finally talk to you freely", McMurrich said, leaving the room after icing me with her mirthless smile.

We heard the tic-tac of her stiletto heels move away, and waited a few moments longer till it faded.

"So?", whispered Alice.

"So Mori replied!"

"Already?". Alice was just as surprised as I was.

"I would have never expected it, right? He told me that chemicals can alter the genetic patrimony of harmless bacteria commonly found in the human body"

"Ah..."

"And when this happens they can become harmful", I continued

Alice looked at me, paling.

"This is not what we wanted to hear", she said after a moment.

"Mori wants to know what my polymer is like, to understand if his findings can relate to our case in any way"

"The information is confidential, so in principle we shouldn't tell him...but death is not a principle. I wish we never found this polymer"

I lowered my head. "Don't tell *me*..."

"You should tell Mori all you know. We need to understand what is happening, and stop it if we can", said Alice

“That’s what I thought. Let me go reply to the email...”

“Please do. We need to move fast before it’s too late. As a side comment, so far my blood cells seem unaffected by the polymer, but this means nothing. Our compound can act in thousands of ways, and the fact that it does nothing to the blood cells is not very insightful. Go now, we’ll talk later”.

I had never heard Alice so laced-up before, and her curtness told me how worried she was.

“Thanks Alice, see you in a while”, I said, and walked back to my desk.

When I got there I suddenly had the feeling something was wrong, although I couldn’t quite say what. I looked at my desk a bit longer, trying to understand what was out of place. It was the chair. I was sure I had pushed myself back and rushed to see Alice, but now the chair was quite close to the edge of the desk. My computer was locked now, but was it when I left to see Alice? I couldn’t remember if I logged off. I generally did, and the PC went to sleep after 5 minutes of inactivity, and yet...I wondered if McMurrich had attempted to enter my computer. My stomach tightened. What if she had succeeded? But did it matter after all when people might be dying because of the polymer I had produced? The hell with her, I thought. I tried to push the thought of McMurrich away and focus on the email to Dr. Mori.

To: mori@centrosanit.it

Subject: RE: genetic modification of common bacteria

Dear Dr. Mori,

Thank you very much for your prompt reply, I am impressed by how quickly you answered my message. The information you have provided is extremely useful to me, and although the structure of my polymer is in part different from the one of the compound described in your paper, there are quite few similarities. The structure of the polymer I am using is shown in the file attached to this email. My colleagues and I found that, when added to dairies, the polymer enhances the growth of bacteria that do not appear in any of our databases. I am worried that such bacteria might have adverse health effects on humans, and I was wondering if, based on your experience, you believe this can be the case.

Thank you in advance for your help.

Best regards,

Iris Celati

I sent the email without re-reading it. My conscience told me I had to, but I knew that I had given out so much information that I could be fired from FoodTech labs. I had signed a confidentiality agreement when I was hired, according to which I could not release specific information regarding the technology developed at FoodTech labs. I pushed back my chair and breathed deeply. All I wanted was get out of this place, and get back home. *I’ll have to phone Christine again tonight*, I thought. I didn’t feel like it in any way, all I longed for was to spend some peaceful time with Jack, put the telescope he had purchased

for me to some good use. I recalled the nights when I just sat on the porch watching the stars and listening to the sounds of the night with glass full of lemonade in my hand. Was I asking too much from life? I went to look for Alice, hoping she was ready to go. If she wasn't I could perhaps call a cab. I really needed some outdoor air, I was suffocating. I locked the PC and walked to the cell culture lab. Alice was there, analyzing some samples.

"Hey Alice, anything new?", I asked

"Not really...I suppose I can take another look at the samples tomorrow, but so far the blood cells are still happy and healthy"

"Good. I emailed Mori again...do you think we can go home early today? I can tell you about my email on the go"

"Well, it's 5 pm already...pretty much time to head home I would say. Did you hear anything from Brad?"

"Shoot, I forgot! Ok, I'll phone him on our way home"

"Let me clean up a few things here and then we can head out. Can you give me 5 minutes? I'll come find you once I'm done here"

"Sure thing", smiled Alice, reassuring as she always was no matter what was happening

I went back to my desk and phoned Jack. I generally didn't when I was at work, talking to him in the ambience of FoodTech labs made me feel uncomfortable. I wanted to keep private things private, and I would have hated McMurrich to pop up while I was in the middle of a conversation with him. But tonight it was different, I was frail and lost and I needed to hear his voice.

"Jack", I said when he picked up, and paused.

"Are you doing fine?", he asked

"This sounds like a deja-vu. I think we had a conversation starting this same way not too long ago"

"We did", he laughed.

"Lots of unexpected things happened today, but I don't want to tell you over the phone"

"What if I come over and you tell me under a starry sky?"

"WOW! I can't believe you just said this...I was thinking about watching stars with the telescope and having a bit of quiet time with you"

"Why are you surprised? I thought someone like you would believe in telepathy"

The accuracy of the comment made me laugh in turn, and it was liberating to chuckle off the weight of the day

"When are you going to get home?", Jack asked

"In about half an hour, or say 40 minutes to be on the safe side"

"I'll meet you at home then"

"This is exactly what I wanted to hear", I said, meaning every word I said.

Alice came to my desk a moment after I had hang up.

"Ready to go?", she asked

"You bet", I said grabbing my back-pack.

I was about to leave when I turned around and took a look at my desk.

"Are you forgetting anything?", asked Alice

"No...let's go talk in the car", I said, walking towards the door.

Chapter 37

"So what is happening?", asked Alice starting the engine.

"I have the feeling that today someone tried to access my computer"

"What?", exclaimed Alice incredulous, taking the eyes off the road a second too long

"Well, I don't know what happened exactly, but when I went back to my desk after talking with you in the cell culture lab my chair was certainly not in the position I had left it"

"I didn't know you were a control freak when it came to the position of objects", she laughed, not taking me seriously.

"I am not, and yet something felt wrong..."

"Probably someone passed by and moved the chair accidentally. Why do you assume that someone tried to break in your PC?"

"Because the chair was so neatly positioned close to my desk. I am sure I pushed it away rushing to see you...and when I got to the lab I found McMurrich there. She left the cell culture lab before I did..."

"Ok, hold on. Are you trying to tell me that you suspect McMurrich?", asked Alice, arching her eyebrows.

"To be honest yes, I thought about it. Perhaps she felt something was cooking and she wanted to know what it was about"

"But do you think she actually read your emails?", Alice said, suddenly worried

"I don't know...I was quite excited, so maybe I forgot to log off the PC. What I hope is that it logged me off automatically before she got there. Maybe she didn't even try to access it, maybe she just had a look at was on my desk. Maybe it wasn't even her, but who else would want to go through my stuff?"

"Things are becoming really creepy lately, I just wish we could live like we used to...", Alice sighted

I was looking out of the window at the landscape streaming by when I saw him. A car passed us on the right. It was only a moment, but I was sure it was him, John Wheeler. A woman was beside him in the car, she was leaning very close, it looked like she was crying.

"Don't tell me", I said.

What was happening all of a sudden? Was John Wheeler cheating on his wife? It dawned on me that maybe she knew and forced him to move away because of that. That's why he had been so embarrassed and silent when I had been there for dinner.

"Don't tell me what?"

"I think I just saw my neighbour passing by with a woman. I think he is cheating on his wife", I said, almost mumbling to myself

"Pardon me?"

"Never mind", I said. "By the way, I explained to Mori what we are up to and what our polymer is like. I sent him the actual structure"

"You did", replied Alice, more as a statement than as a question, and then she was silent for a moment.

"You've done the right thing", she said at last

"You think so?"

"Yes", Alice confirmed.

We didn't speak for a long while, each lost in our separate thoughts orbiting around the same source of anxiousness. When I focused on the road again I saw the sign for my exit, hanging up high on the highway. I looked at Alice, and she didn't seem to notice.

"Hey", I said

"Hey", she echoed back at me.

"We should take the next exit", I said

Alice signaled and moved to the right lane, smoothing into the exit.

"Thanks, I was about to drive on. Maybe that's what we should do, drive away and leave this ugly business behind"

I turned towards Alice and looked at her. She was tense now, and yet her features still had the honest freshness that made her so good to talk to when the day was dull or the morale dim.

"You know what's good about this situation? We can count on each other", I said smiling.

"Sure, but it's like blind leading blind", she laughed, "none of us has a clue about what is happening. That's why I am betting on this Dr. Mori you found. But if we cannot solve the arcane we will have to talk to the police...", she said, and I nodded.

Chapter 38

When we reached my place Jack was sitting on the steps.

"Is that your date", Alice asked.

"You like him?", I asked, waving at Jack

“Yes, but I consider my friend’s men off limit, so you don’t need to worry”, Alice teased me

I shook my head laughing.

“Thanks for the ride silly”, I said, getting out of the car.

“Yup. See you tomorrow and try not to think about work tonight, ok?”

“Yes mam” I said, giving her the military salute.

When Alice drove away I ran towards Jack, with my arms open. He got up from the steps and stood there still, hands in his pockets, smiling his melancholic calm smile, his clear eyes squinting at the brightness of the sky.

“I’m so glad you’re here”, I said, without letting go off him.

“Hey, what’s happening?”

“Nothing. It’s just that I am really glad to see you”

Jack held me back, gripping my arms, and looked at me tilting his head.

“So, can you tell me what is happening?”

“More than I can handle”, I replied sighing.

“Let’s go talk inside, ehm?”, Jack said, guiding me to my home by the hand.

When Jack closed the door behind us the cool dimness of my place blinded me for a few moments, and I stood at the entrance, easing into the familiarity of the space. Jack slipped off his shoes, and took my hand again, taking me to the kitchen and pulling up a chair for me.

“I’ll get you a lemonade”, he said, opening the fridge.

“Dr. Mori replied to my emails. The guy who wrote about how the genetic patrimony of E. Coli could change in the presence of chemicals...”

Jack laid the lemonade in front of me, and filled a glass for himself.

“And what did he say?”

“He found that bacteria commonly present in the human body can also change in the presence of chemicals. When that happens they can affect the functionality of processes occurring in the human body...”

“So you think that somehow the polymer you brought at the cross cancer institute contaminated the environment, weird bacteria began to develop and people died?”

“More or less yes...and Christine told me that at the NY cancer institute the same thing is happening. Isn’t this too odd to be a coincidence?”

“But what does your polymer have to do with NY? Someone had to bring it there for it to contaminate places on the two opposite coasts”

"Exactly. So what if someone actually *brought* the polymer on the other coast for reasons I don't know? I told you the guy from the Cross Cancer told me not to bring more sample there...why?"

"This is too far-fetched, and if you weren't so scared and worried you wouldn't come up with such ideas"

I was silent for a moment.

"Maybe you're right. I want to call Christine though, I promised her"

"Remember that journalists love scoops, so she will try to find one. Call her, but don't rush to make conclusions"

"I won't..."

I punched Christine's number and sat there hearing the free tone on the line with one ear and Jack digging in the fridge and moving around pans with the other.

"Come on girl, pick up the bloody phone", I mumbled between my teeth, feeling anxiously impotent.

I was about to hang up when Christine picked up the phone.

"Finally!", I exclaimed

"Woah! I was about to miss you, I just walked in. You sound worried", she said, her tone rushed and airy as usual

"I sound worried because I am", I said, with a note of bitterness I did not intend

"Well, then hold on tight. I made my checks today and I found that the cross cancer institute and the NY cancer institute collaborate closely. There are pictures of an Indian guy and a red-haired disturbing geek shaking hands with a doctor from the NY institute, a big shot apparently"

"Sandeep and Wilhelm...", I whispered, the phone shaking in my hand

"You know these people?"

"I do...", I said

"Who are they?"

"The people with whom I collaborated at the cross cancer institute to understand how my polymer could swell dairies"

"Ah!", Christine exclaimed, sounding as excited as I was faint.

"When did the deaths start to happen at the NY cancer institute?"

"The first patient died on July 16, and after that there were other 10 casualties in the next two following weeks, and another 21 deaths this month. And the dates when patients began dying at the Cross cancer institute are not too far from these. Too many coincidences for all this to be random, right?"

My mouth was dry. July 16. I had met Sandeep at the Cross cancer institute around the beginning of June, and handed him a sample of pure polymer. After that Wilhelm got involved, and asked me for

more polymer. "I would care to duplicate the analyses on it, to ensure that the results are reliable", he had said. I remembered his words with the strange sharpness I often have in recalling details.

"Are you still there?", Christine asked

"The dates match. Sandeep and Wilhelm could have very well passed my polymer some guy at the NY cancer institute"

"Can you try to work the people at the cross cancer institute and try to get some hints as to what they are up to?", Christine said

"Ehm uhm. Nope, I cannot. Sandeep contacted my colleague and told him that we should keep away from him and Wilhelm, and avoid bringing more sample there. I want to go talk to the police"

It was Christine's turn to fall silent.

"I must. If they are up to some dirty business with dead bodies involved you don't want to be one of the suspects"

"Christine, I will go tonight. Now", I said, my heart pounding so hard I felt dizzy

"Stay calm. You haven't done anything wrong, so you will be fine as long as you tell the police all you know"

"I'll have to call the colleagues who are collaborating with me before going"

"Sure. Let me know how things go"

"Thanks Christine", I said, and hang up.

I walked to the kitchen and let myself fall on the chair. Jack saw my devastated expression and turned off the stove, wiping his wet hands on the jeans.

"I'll go to the police", I said.

"I know. Let's go, you can call your colleagues on the way there"

If only I hadn't seen John Wheeler with another woman in his car while I was driving home I probably would have knocked on the Wheelers' door that night. John was my neighbour and he was a detective, so it made sense to talk to him first to ask for advice. And yet I couldn't get myself to talk to Mrs. Wheeler, and walk again in the odd atmosphere of their living room.

"Sure, let's go", I said, and we drove off to the police station.

Chapter 39

"Have a seat, Detective Avery will be with you shortly", the receptionist told us after I explained my case.

There were rows of plastic chair along the walls, along each side of the room. "Homeland security" said a stemma hang on the wall opposite to the one where we were sitting. I sat with my legs slightly open, leaning my elbows on my knees, my head dropping. Then I looked up again. I read "Homeland security"

over and again each time I raised my head, with the compulsive greediness with which I intake every written word when I am stranded in a waiting room with nothing to do. There was a watch on the wall along which we sat, and I turned every now and then to check the time.

“You’ll be fine”, Jack said patting my shoulder, “I’ll wait here when you go inside”.

I nodded, wishing he could follow me in the detective’s office.

Marian Avery walked in the room after a while. It seemed to me like I had been waiting for at least half an hour, but I caught a glimpse of the watch before following her along the corridor to her office and I saw we had been in the room for no more than 10 minutes. Jack smiled when he saw me turning back, with pleading eyes and pale, as he told me months later, recalling that night.

“Have a seat”, Detective Avery told me when we got to her office. I landscaped the room, rolling around my eyes discretely, recording the shape and colour of the functional objects in the room: a phone, a window, a stapler, the neon lights. And a picture. I noticed the frame first, and then who was captured in the image. I gasped with surprise.

“Is that your kid? I met her at the lake. She told me her name...”, I paused a moment, trying to remember it. “Mirth, that’s it. She was there alone, waiting for a dog. I dropped her home”

Marian Avery looked at me hard and long, and I noticed her eyes had the same colour and shape as Mirth’s eyes, but they were harder, and defensive, and now they were studying me attentively.

“She was alone, you say?”, she asked

“Yes”, I replied, realizing a second after I answered that perhaps I had given away her daughter’s secret.

Marian Avery sighted.

“She’s a smart kid, but she shouldn’t be running around alone at night”, her voice softening

I wondered how she knew we met during the evening, since I hadn’t said anything about the time. She kept her eyes down for a moment, lost in her own thoughts. Then she raised her eyes, unnerved for the briefest instant before recomposing herself.

“So, Ms. Celati, what is bringing you here?”, she asked, hands joint, and her eyes locked again on mine as they had been when I told her about Mirth.

“I am not sure about what is happening...”

“Why don’t you start by telling me all the facts that made you suspect there is something wrong”, she said with a controlled tone

I told her about the polymer, Sandeep’s strange behaviour, the journalist wanting to see someone to discuss the dead patients at the Cross cancer center, the deaths at the NY cancer center and the possible connection between the two.

“I don’t have any sound proof that the polymer I synthesized has been misused, but there is something fishy in what is happening...”

Detective Avery listened to me without interrupting, and was silent a moment longer after I finished. Her face remained plain, and I couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"Is the cross cancer center the only place where someone got a hold of your polymer?", she asked at last

"No, I also took it to the DNA research center to run some analyses"

"Are you the only one who works with this polymer in your company?"

"No, I am collaborating with some colleagues"

"Can I have their names?"

"Alice Spears and Brad Briggs are my closest collaborators. Mike Vanderbilt also collaborated with us on this project, although he is not fully involved"

Detective Avery nodded, taking notes.

"And what about your boss?"

"Janna McMurrich"

"Is that your boss's name?"

"Yes"

"Did you discuss your concerns with the colleagues involved?"

"Yes. Alice is actually the one who told me that we should talk to the police if we couldn't understand what was happening. I spoke with her while coming here, she said she will drop by tomorrow. Brad also knows I am here. He is worried, but I guess he is still hesitant to accept that there is something wrong"

She nodded again.

"And what is your boss's opinion?", she asked

"I don't know too well. I try to avoid talking to her, and even if I did I wouldn't learn much more regarding her opinions"

Marian Avery arched her brows.

"I don't like my boss", I said shrugging my shoulders and smiling apologetically

"Why is that?"

"She is the boss and I am below her, that's how she conceives our relationship. I hope this part of the conversation can remain strictly private, or I'll have to do some job-hunting very soon"

"Every part of our conversation is strictly private, unless we bring this case to court. And even then nobody will be interested in knowing how you feel about your boss, unless you decide to threaten or kill her"

Now it was my turn to arch my eyebrows.

"What?", I asked shocked

Marian Avery smiled, looking amused for the first time since I met her.

“But since I don’t expect you to kill or threaten your boss nobody except me will know you dislike her”

I was tense, I had come here to receive help and I felt that this detective was messing me around instead. A surge of hostility rose within me. Marian Avery sensed it, her smile died on her lips and she looked at me seriously.

“I always treat people respectfully”, she said, as if she had read my thoughts.

I nodded, feeling empty and tired all of a sudden.

“I also spoke about my polymer with a researcher in Italy, Mauro Mori”

“So he involved in the project?”

“No, my boss doesn’t even know I am in contact with him. I signed a disclosure policy when I got hired, and I could be fired for giving out information about our technologies. But I *had* to email this person, you see. He studies the effect of chemicals on bacteria, and I think he can help me understand what is going on, at least from a scientific standpoint”. I spoke quickly, almost defensively.

“And has this...ehm...Mauro Mori helped you after all?”

“Somewhat, yes. Our communication has just started though, and solving scientific questions takes time”

Marian nodded.

“Ok, thank you for taking the time to come here. I will look into this, call me if you notice anything else or remember details you forgot to tell me tonight”

“I will”, I said. “So what should I do now? I mean, should I keep doing my research as if nothing happened?”

“For the time being, yes. Avoid going to the cross cancer institute though. I will call you with further instructions in the next days, if I have any”, she said and stood up, shaking my hand

She saw me to the hallway. Before leaving I turned around to thank her, and it was only then I noticed that her face was strained, and shaded by worries thoughts I hadn’t perceived earlier.

Chapter 40

Jack was sitting with his legs lightly spread, leaning his elbows on his knees, his head dropping like mine had, in what was half tenseness half boredom. He raised it when he heard Detective Avery and I talking in the hallway. There were questions in his eyes when I walked in the waiting room, but he looked at me without asking. I noticed his face was weary too, and felt guilty for having dragged him there.

“Hey”, I said, touching his shoulder

“Let’s go”, he said smiling and pushing himself up from the chair.

We walked to the car without speaking. The night had plunged in the sky now, punctuated by the loud voices of the cicadas and illuminated by grains of light from far away stars. I raised my head a moment

before stepping in the car, inhaling the air deeply, trying to take in the scent of the earth. I knew it was a beautiful night, but it was hard to feel it, oppressed as I was by the worries and the heaviness of the day spent at FoodTech labs. When I turned around I saw that Jack was already in the car, observing me from the driver seat.

“Sorry...”, I said, climbing up on the truck.

Jack lay his hand on my leg, and pat me smiling, then shrugged.

“It’s all good. So what did the detective say?”, he asked while turning on the engine

“That she’ll look into it”

“And did she mean it?”

“I think so. She looked worried at a point, or at least I think she did. Maybe she was just worn out, like you and I are now. I cannot tell what she thought, she was quite impenetrable”

“But did she ask you to stop working with the polymer?”

“I wondered if I should, but she told me to keep doing my job as if nothing happened, until further notice”

“Until further notice?”

“Yeah, she’ll contact me if she needs to”

Jack shrugged.

“Ok...”, he said uncertainly

We merged into the provincial road, not speaking for a while, till I broke the silence.

“But what is your gut feeling about this? I mean, about the polymer causing the bacteria to change...”, I asked

“My gut feeling about the hypothesis of bacteria undergoing mutations and harming people, perhaps even killing them?”

“Yes”

“I don’t have enough elements to say, but I cannot say it’s impossible”

“This means that you think my polymer killed somebody”

“No, this means I don’t know. I’ll call Fred tomorrow, he’s a good one to talk to when you need science or life advices”

“Your former PhD boss”

“Him, yes”, he said

“Do you want to look at the stars when we get home?”, Jack asked after a pause

I smiled and nodded.

"I was just thinking before getting in the car that it was such a waste to let a night like this be soiled by worries"

"I know"

"How do you know?"

"I saw you looking up at the sky when I was in the car"

"You know what Jack?"

He turned around to take a quick glance at me. "What?"

"I really love you. And maybe there's a reason for all this"

"I love you too", he said, glancing at me once more before turning his eyes to the road, his face tired but the smile unfading from his lips

"And for sure there's more than one reason for what is happening"

I shook my head. "I mean, a reason for what is happening with the polymer. Think about it. I met the daughter of the detective I spoke to on the lake and..."

"Who?"

"The daughter of the detective, Mirth. I saw her picture on the detective's desk tonight, that's how I know Mirth, the kid I saw on the lake, she is Mariam Avery's daughter"

"Mariam Avery?"

"Yes, the detective"

"So, what about her daughter?"

"I met her on the lake where her previous babysitter drowned"

"And?"

"Nothing, but it seems like there's a scheme behind all this, although I cannot see what it is"

Jack didn't reply. I knew he was thinking about Lisa and how she had drowned in the ocean. I lay my hand on his leg, but he didn't react.

"I'm sorry", I said

"Don't be. We should stop thinking tonight. The stars are waiting for us. We'll make a full load of starry peace and then we'll go to bed, what do you say?"

"I say it's an awesome plan", I smiled.

Chapter 41

I was lying in bed next morning, my eyes still closed, when my cell phone blipped to signal that I just received a text message. I moaned, retreating close to Jack and wrapping his arms around me.

"What time is it?", he asked

I moaned again, before reaching for the clock on my bed table. 5:15, who was texting me at that hour? I got up swaying sleepily to the drawers where I forgot the phone, turned on, the night before.

"It's Brad, he's telling me he feels sick and won't make it to work"

"But why is he texting you so early?", Jack asked, pulling himself up on his elbows

"Not sure...he knows I generally turn on my cell when I wake up, he probably didn't expect me to read it now"

"Ok. And why does he know you turn on your cell when you wake up?"

"Because whenever he texted me late at night I would reply early in the morning, he joked about the ritual and I told him I turn on my cell when I wake up...why?"

"Nothing, I was just asking"

"Are you jealous?"

"Maybe"

I sneaked back in bed, and cuddled besides Jack, laughing.

"There's nothing wrong with Brad, but I would never get myself to see him *that way*..."

"What time is it by the way?"

"5.15, we still have 15 minutes of luxury in bed"

He leaned back, sighting.

"There's times when I really wonder why I am doing this"

"What do you mean?"

"Why I am running a bakery and waking up at this hour every day"

"I thought you loved what you did"

"I still do for the most part, but I feel I am sliding in the declining part of my love story with this business. When I started it I was mostly taking a stance, setting a distance from a past that hurt me so much, but I never thought I would be a baker for the rest of my days. Perhaps now it's the time to stop"

"And what do you want for the next phase of your life?"

"I still have to think about it. It has always been easier for me to understand what I don't want, rather than decide what I am after"

"Really?"

"Yes. And sometimes I decide what to do more by contrast to what I don't want than because I am fully sure that it is the best choice"

"I didn't expect this"

“Well, there are exceptions. I know I want you to be in the next phase of my life, and in this case I am sure this is something I really want, in itself and not in contrast to something else”

“Thank you”, I said, pushing myself against him further. “This is what I want too”

Jack turned me around and kissed me.

“Really?”, he asked

“Really”, I said

“Thank you”, he said, and lay still for a moment, as if pondering my words

“But for the time being I still have to get up and get the bakery going”

“Ehm...”

“Come on lazy dog, get up and let’s have breakfast together”

Chapter 42

When I got to the office I took a glance at my desk before sitting down. Everything seemed in the right spot, so perhaps nobody was trying to dig into my files after all. I told myself that the stress of the last days had probably plunged me in a state of paranoia. I turned on my PC in a tense mayhem of mixed feelings, oscillating between the hope and the fear to receive a message from Dr. Mori. A part of me wanted to get off the hook and leave the whole business to the police, forget any of this ever happened and go back to a life where my lab games had no major consequences in real life. After all I had invented the polymer, but I had never decided that it should be released. And yet another part of me needed to know what my polymer had done. Leaving aside all rationalizations, the polymer was my piece of art and I felt responsible for it. I had created the black potion, so I felt I was the one who had to break its spell. And deep down, in spite of all that was happening, I wanted to crack the mystery behind its effects, inspired by the same irresponsible and purely scientific curiosity that had led to its creation.

I accessed my mailbox and there it was, the reply from Dr. Mori.

Dear Iris,

I had a look at the structure of your polymer and it has indeed some similarities with the compounds we tested. I suspect that it can have similar effects to the chemicals we used, possibly causing changes in some of the bacteria found in the intestine and eventually leading to malfunctions of the human body. Of course these are simple hypotheses, which need to be tested experimentally before drawing conclusions. We have great facilities here, and I would be more than happy to investigate the effect of your polymer on bacteria. Assessing its impact on the human body is not as simple, but we could begin by conducting preliminary tests using human cells and tissues to get some insights about what your polymer can do. If travelling is an option for you, we could conduct some interesting research together on the subject here at my research center in Milan.

All the best,

Mauro Mori

My heart was pounding so loud its beat resounded in my thoughts. Thump, *I cannot travel*, thump, *I really want to go*, thump, *isn't it a strange coincidence that Mori lives in Milan, where my grand-grandparents were born and where I always wanted to go?*, thump, *what do I tell McMurrich?*, thump, *Do I lie to her and tell her this is about a family emergency?*, thump, *I need to talk to Jack, but let's go see Alice first*, thump.

I heard someone coming from my back, minimized the window and turned around, trying to look casual. My ears buzzed and I wondered what my face looked like.

"What is happening?", McMurrich asked, looking annoyed more than concerned

"Why?"

"You look quite distraught"

"Something bad happened, in my family", I heard myself say, and I was surprised by how the lie flew out my mouth faster than my thoughts

"I am sorry to hear that"

"I might need to ask you for some time. I need to reach the hospital"

"Sure, you can have the morning off"

"Unfortunately the hospital is on the east coast, and I want to spend some days there"

"Days?"

"I will use my holidays this way. This is important to me"

McMurrich frowned.

"The authorities have called saying that they will pass by in the next couple of days for an inspection, I need you here. I don't understand what this is about", McMurrich said, eyes bugged

"The authorities are coming?", I asked.

Mariam Avery acts fast, I thought. But was this her doing or was this inspection a coincidence? The speed of my heartbeat ramped up a bit more.

"Yes", McMurrich said

"When?"

"As I said, in the next couple of days, but they didn't give me an exact date", McMurrich replied, irritated

"Perhaps I can leave Thursday night, but I cannot wait longer than that. I don't want to get there when it's too late. I hope..."

"Yes, yes, I understand", she said, cutting me short

I thought it would have been good to have a few days to get organized, but I needed my departure to sound urgent for my story to be convincing. I knew the whole set-up was insane, but I had gone too far to pull back. I wondered what Mori would think about my rushed trip following a couple email exchanges. Could I tell him what was happening? First rule, don't rush when you are not lucid. *I am not lucid*, thump.

"Let me know when you'll be leaving as soon as you decide"

"Will do", I said, trying to match my tone to McMurrich's

McMurrich started to walk away, then turned around.

"You haven't told anybody about this polymer, have you?"

"What do you mean?", I asked, trying to sound casual

"The question is: have you shared any information about the polymer?", she reiterated

"You haven't discussed it with anybody except Mark from the DNA center and...I also went to get it analyzed at the cross cancer institute"

"Yes, of course", McMurrich said, corrugating her eyebrows.

She would have been a pretty woman if only her facial mimicry hadn't been so abrasive

"From now on, don't have anyone else analyze it"

"Why, what happened?", I asked, trying to sound as innocent and surprised as I could

"Because I have been talking with people who are really interested in buying it, and I want to make sure its composition remains proprietary. MagnaSize, that's how we'll call it"

"MagnaSize?"

"Yes, do you like this brand name. I came up with it last night"

Geez lady, is this how you spend your nights? You are a complete idiot McMurrich, and you even believed my lie, I thought so loud I wondered if she heard. No, she didn't, she was too dry for that type of intuition. I sighed, relieved.

"Of course, I understand very well that all this is confidential. And the name...sure, why not?", I said

"Good", she said and walked away tic-tacking her stiletto heels.

Chapter 43

When McMurrich left I emailed Mori to tell him I could fly out as soon as Thursday night and kept in front of the computer, trying to read some papers, looking up plane tickets, minimizing and maximizing the mailbox window every minute. After half an hour I told myself I couldn't sit in front of the computer for the whole day. *Another ten minutes, then you go find Alice in the lab, try to be productive*, I told myself. But five minutes later I received Mori's email.

Dear Iris,

I look forward to having you here. Please let me know if you need any help to make arrangements, I can advise you about good hotels at affordable prices and help you find your way from the airport once you get here.

All the best,

Mauro Mori

I maximized the webpage where I had been eying the flight I wanted to take. Click purchase. Click accept the conditions. Input your personal information, input your credit card information. Accept again. "Thank you for travelling with us", said the screen and it was done.

I was still sitting there, with "Thank you for travelling with us" printed on my screen when Brad walked in.

"Hello", he said

"Hey", I said, turning around. "I thought you were sick"

"I was nauseous this morning, but after throwing up every single molecule I had in my stomach I felt better"

"Thanks for the details"

"Well, you asked..."

"That's what you think. Changing topic, there's something I need to tell you, but not here"

"Yes, we need to talk"

"What happened?"

"No, not here..."

"Right. What about going to the cafeteria downstairs?"

"I hope McMurrich won't crave coffee while we are there. Anyways, that's our best bet, we can't go anywhere else without the risk of raising suspicions"

The cafeteria was quite empty when we got there, with the exception of two or three people from another division of FoodTech labs and a cleaning lady wiping the floor. We found a table in a corner, and we sat there with smoking cups of black coffee.

"What did you tell the police yesterday night?"

"Everything. I told them everything"

"That is?"

"That I saw a journalist at the cross cancer institute who wondered why so many patients were dying, that Sandeep was scared...and that I was worried although I had no proofs that something is going wrong"

"And what did the police say?"

"Detective Avery, that's who I spoke to. She said she'll look into this. I gave her your name, she wanted to know who else was working on the polymer"

"I should probably go talk to them too. Shouldn't I?"

"It's up to you, but I think you should. You see that there's something wrong in this whole story, right? You don't want to be suspected or involved in a mess you didn't cause"

"I've wanted to believe all along that your worries didn't have any solid foundation..."

"I know"

"But there are too many hints that something fishy is happening after all"

"Ehm Uhm", I nodded

"So I'll go see the police after work"

"I spoke to Mariam Avery, here's her phone number", I said, taking from my wallet the card she had given me the previous night.

"I'll find a pen", I said, going to the cashier to ask for them. I copied down the information on the back of a napkin and handed it to Brad.

"Thanks", he said

"But this isn't what I wanted to talk about"

"No?", he asked surprised

"I am flying out to Milan on Thursday night to meet Mori"

"What?"

"You heard. I am flying out to Milan on Thursday night to meet Mori", I repeated.

"Are you serious?", he exclaimed

"Shhhhh", I said, placing a finger on my mouth, "I had just finished purchasing the flight ticket when you walked in the office"

"Did you tell McMurrich?"

"I told her I had a family emergency, I hinted to a family member being about to die in a hospital. Can I count on you to back me up on this?"

"Oh boy"

"I want to understand what's happening, don't you? Mori can help"

"And you'll fly all the way to Italy", he said, looking at me with an incredulous expression painted on his face

"I trust my instinct"

"I see that. And for how long are you going to be away?"

"I'll be back on Monday of the next following week"

"Well good luck, we need it"

I smiled.

"I think we better get back to the labs now, or Miss Bossy Lady upstairs might notice. Go figure she was annoyed when I told her I needed few days off to see a dying relative, using up my holidays. She deserves the worst"

Brad shrugged.

"I'll back you up"

"Thanks", I said, getting up and pushing my chair under the table.

"You know I have the feeling someone tried to have a look at my desk, at my files...I don't know", I said

"What do you mean?"

"The other day, after you left, I found that my desk looked different"

Brad stopped to look at me with a puzzled expression, holding the door of the cafeteria open. The lady who had been cleaning the floor approached us with her bucket of dirty water.

"Sorry", she excused herself, pulling the bucket past the door with one hand while holding the mop with the other.

"Come on, keep walking", I said, tugging him. "So yes, I had rushed to see Alice and found McMurrich in her lab. I waited for the boss to leave and then I told her about what Mori found about common intestinal bacteria, how they could change with chemicals and affect the human body..."

"Really? He told you that?"

"Yes, sorry, I forgot to mention it. So many things happened since your pipes leaked at home..."

"I can see that"

"Mori's research suggests that common bacteria can change and became toxic to humans, but his findings are still preliminary..."

"Now I am starting to see why you are flying to Milan. And what about your desk?"

"Well, I came back and the chair had been pushed very close to the desk, although I had leaped up from it and certainly left it in a random position"

"Ok"

“Nobody was around, so why would someone move the chair unless he or she – and I think it’s a she – went to have a look at my desk?”

“What was on your desk?”

“Nothing important, but I hoped the computer was locked”

“I see”

“Another thing I didn’t tell you. There’s going to be an inspection to the labs in the next coming days?”

“Who told you?”

“McMurrich. She was annoyed, and that’s at least in part why she wanted me around. I don’t know if the police has something to do with this...”

“I see...Ok, I’ll be here a moment longer to call Mariam Avery”, he said, stopping.

“But you start going upstairs, or else it might really seem like we’re up to something if anybody notices us”, he added

I walked past the hallway to the elevators, where the lady was wiping the metal plates around the buttons with a rag.

“Sorry”, she said, interrupting her cleaning to let me press the up button.

Chapter 44

When I walked in the labs I heard McMurrich’s voice.

“If you let me know what you are looking for I can make your task easier”, she was saying.

I decided to stay where I was and understand what was happening before making myself visible, and I lingered close to the entrance a while longer.

“We just need to verify that the lab is safe and make a few checks on the chemicals you use and produce here”, a man said.

So the inspection was here already. I felt a surge of disquiet cheerfulness bubble within me. I would phone Mariam Avery later on to tell her about the inspection and try to understand if she had sent these people. I pictured a scandal exploding around the polymer – the MagnaSize, what a name! - and the labs being shut down. I pictured being laid off from FoodTech and not having a stipend, and I felt strangely relieved rather than worried.

“Not a problem. I can find the people who work in the different labs to help you with any questions you might have”, I heard McMurrich say.

I headed back to my desk, trying to act casual. McMurrich was talking with her back to the door, but somehow she caught a glimpse of me while I was trying to walk past her unnoticed.

“Iris”, she said, the misplaced severity of her tone echoing in the high-tech environment like the voice of a hateful governess from a classical novel.

“Yes”, I replied as neutrally as I could

"These people are here to inspect the labs. Start by showing them the room where you usually work, I'll go find Alice in the meanwhile"

"Sure. The lab is this way", I said, gesturing them to follow me.

"Iris, by the way", I said, turning around and tending my hand after McMurrich had walked away.

There were two inspectors. One was bulky, and the skin of his face was saggy with faintly red patches. It was a strange thought for that moment, but I felt like I wanted to get him through this inspection as fast as I could. This man is not well and he might have no more than one year ahead of him, I thought. Now he doesn't know and he burns away his time in meaningless tasks. I act and smile, and show him the labs wondering if he is here for the polymer but trying to hide my anxiousness. He plays along patiently, shaking hands with me and looking around. And all of a sudden –for no reason –I recalled a man I once saw queuing up at the check-in of an airport, too polite to interrupt the airline representative chatting inanely and tell her to speed up because he was about to miss his flight.

"Jim", he said, his smiled constrained in the abundance of his flesh.

The other guy was trim and brisk.

"Curtis, good to meet you", he said, shaking my hand briefly with his nervous grip.

I liked this guy better than the chubby one, although I knew I would play ruthless with him if needed.

When I brought them in the room they started looking at the instruments, without speaking. Then Curtis opened the fridge, and began looking at the jars with interest, picking them up one at a time and rolling them in his hands.

"What's in these jars?", he asked, after replacing the last one in the fridge

"The contents are written on the labels", I said

"There are acronyms written on these labels. What I need to know is the *actual* content of these jars", Curtis explained, with a display of patience superimposed on an tone that said, "I am no fool"

"Right", I smiled.

I went to the fridge and began explaining.

"This is a pudding sample, to which a polymer has been added..."

"What polymer are you working with?", he asked, while Jim was standing behind us, hands joint behind his back.

"It's an organic polymer I am developing..."

At that moment McMurrich stepped in, followed by Alice.

"Everything fine so far?", she asked

"I am curious about the composition of the polymer additioned to this sample", he said, looking at her.

Then he asked, addressing me specifically, "Do you have some pure polymer I can look at?"

This man knows, I told myself

I handed him the vial with the pure polymer. He looked at it again with the same attentive expression he had before, as if gazing at the jars could be somehow revealing.

“So, what were you saying about the composition of the polymer?”, he asked

McMurrich looked at me frostily

You fool, they’ll see through you as crystal clear as through an icicle, I thought

“It’s an organic polymer”, I said, knowing I wasn’t giving out any useful information. I hoped he would bring the polymer with him and analyze it. But was he allowed?

“This is a proprietary formulation”, jumped in McMurrich

“We understand this very well, Dr. McMurrich”, said the trim guy

There was a pause, and we all stood there wondering what the next move would be. Curtis had an advantage, and I think McMurrich suspected he would give her checkmate. She tried to look confident but I sensed she wasn’t.

“We will never disclose any of your industrial secrets, but we need to verify the safety of the products in your labs”, Curtis said

“This is an organic polymer, and it does not pose any risks when handled with the precautions used in these labs”, McMurrich said defensively

“We will need to take a sample of the polymer to have it analyzed. This is normal routine, we are doing these tests in a number of labs”, Curtis explained coolly

“This polymer is proprietary, as I explained to you earlier”, McMurrich insisted

“Dr. McMurrich, we are conducting a simple inspection but you look quite anxious”, he said, looking at her slyly.

“I am determined to protect the novelty of our products”, she said, still in control but with a slight crack in her voice.

“Dr. McMurrich, we can come back with a warrant or get the sample now and have a look at it without making a big fuzz over this. Just tell us what you prefer and we’ll go from there”, Curtis said.

McMurrich was cornered, but she refused to admit she had lost the battle.

“May I ask the reason for this urgency? Our labs have always been in good standing, and FoodTech is a respected corporation. We *will* contact our lawyers about this matter if confidentiality will not be kept when handling our products”

“Certainly, we respect your corporation and the need for confidentiality. But I hope you appreciate the difference between confidential and hidden to the authorities”, said Curtis, smiling a pungent smile.

“We are not hiding anything”, McMurrich said

“That’s great. In this case you have nothing to worry about. We’ll be in touch with you shortly”

Curtis smiled again and headed to the exit, without waiting for us to guide us. Jim turned to me, with a hint of apology on his face, but then he followed his colleague without saying goodbye.

Chapter 45

McMurrich walked out the lab, he gaze trailing behind the officers as they walked to the exit. Alice and I looked at each other without speaking. Alice smiled tentatively and shrugged turning the palm of her hands upwards. I smiled back, comforted by her presence. We were still smiling at each other when McMurrich walked back in the room.

"I want you in my office", she said

"Sure", said Alice, and I nodded, the smile dying on my face

"Go find Brad", she added, looking at me

I found Brad at his desk, frowning at what he was reading.

"You should read this paper", he said

"I would love to, but now McMurrich wants us in her office"

"What happened?"

"The inspection happened and it wasn't that smooth"

"I saw two guys...so those were the inspectors?"

"Yes. They took the polymer, McMurrich didn't want them to but they had it their way. They menaced to come back with a warrant unless we gave them what they wanted"

"Oh..."

"Ok, McMurrich is waiting for us, so we better go. She is not in a great mood, as you can guess"

Brad got up, and then said, standing close and whispering, "After all I think your detective sent someone over..."

"I'll call her later and try to find out", I whispered back.

Then, raising my voice and pushing him, "Come on, let's go now"

McMurrich's door was half-closed.

"So you are happy with your job here?", I heard McMurrich ask

"Of course", Alice answered

Brad gave me a questioning gaze. I shrugged and shook my head to mean I had no clue, then gave a gentle knock on the door.

"Come in", said McMurrich.

She was sitting at the round table right across Alice, who looked up at us uncomfortably.

"Have a seat", said McMurrich

"I was asking Alice if she is happy here", she continued and paused.

Brad and I didn't reply, waiting for her to address us with the same question.

"I know you think I am the worst possible boss, and I understand your reasons"

I didn't know where this was going, but I was intrigued by the odd turn the meeting was taking.

"You think I am a terrible boss because I am detached and perhaps authoritative", she continued, and I was amazed at the fact that she could judge herself with honesty. Perhaps she wasn't as stupid as I deemed, and the thought she could grasp my untold meanings made me panic for a moment.

"The reality is that once upon a time I was a researcher like you are, but now I have a different role. I could play friends with you, but the dry truth is that the greatest favor I can do you is to market the products you come up with so that we all stay in the business. When things go well you get promotions and raises, and I do too as a matter of fact"

Right, I thought, but having a friendly working environment wouldn't defeat the purpose of doing business together, would it? I was still puzzled as to where this speech was going.

"But although you probably see me as a coldblooded shark, I do have a code of ethics and I follow it quite strictly. If I had real doubts about the safety of a product I would not circulate it"

"When you asked me if we needed to test the safety of the polymer you synthesized I was dismissive because I cannot understand why it wouldn't be safe"

I wondered if McMurrich had put up all this show because she feared the authorities would point their fingers at her for what had happened. But did she know what had happened? If she did it meant she was involved. The idea gave me the creeps.

"However the last facts induce me to believe that there is something wrong, something I am unaware of..."

She paused, looking unsure about how to continue

"Did you ever notice any atypical behaviour in any of the people working here?", she asked

I arched my brows.

"What type of behaviour are you referring to?", asked Alice

"Any type of behaviour you would consider suspicious", she replied vaguely

"No, not really", said Brad

"I haven't either", confirmed Alice

"Neither have I, but why are you asking?", I said

"Two nights ago I was here till late and made a round in the labs to see if any of you was still working"

"And we weren't, so I suppose we don't deserve a raise", I snapped before I could stop myself

"I would have been very glad to give you a raise, Iris, if only I had been able to release your polymer as I had planned", McMurrich replied, and I was surprised she didn't sound like my sarcasm vexed her

"Sorry", I said, meaning it

"Who I found in the lab though was Mike. He was slipping a vial in his back-pack. I saw this very well, but I decided to pretend I didn't before understanding what was happening. I spoke to the security, and convinced them to let me see the videos in the cameras. Mike has an empty vial with him, and he transferred a small amount of what was in a vial stored in the fridge in the one he had brought with him. I checked the fridge, and noticed that you keep the pure polymer in a vial that looks like the one from which he transferred material into the one he hid in his back-pack before leaving"

"Mike?", I asked incredulous

"Mike", nodded McMurrich

"Why would Mike take the polymer?", I insisted

"Maybe because he wanted to sell it to someone before FoodTech did", McMurrich said, pondering my reaction to her statement

I shook my head, cursing the rotten environment where I was working. How could Mike betray us? I wondered if he had made up the whole story about Sandeep. I would go back that same afternoon and understand what was happening, although I didn't know how to get away from the labs without having McMurrich notice. And I needed to call Mariam Avery again.

"But where is Mike now?", asked Alice

"I have no clue", replied McMurrich

"You mean he disappeared?!", Brad exclaimed, brows arched

"That's right", said McMurrich

I wondered if we should tell McMurrich about Sandeep. Or did she know already? I decided it was better to wait. I felt like I was walking on quick-sands, all my coordinates scrambled and my certainties gone. I turned around to look at Brad and Alice. Please tell me I will always be able to trust you, I mentally pleaded. I would have sworn I could, but then I would have said the same about Mike just few minutes earlier. I pondered the chance of a misunderstanding. Maybe Mike did take the polymer, but not for the reasons McMurrich believed. Why hadn't he told us though? I recalled all of a sudden that he hadn't picked up the phone the night before when I had tried to call him on my way to the police, although I hadn't given much attention to the fact.

"I hope you will inform me in case you hear anything from him", McMurrich said interrupting my thoughts.

She paused and gave each of us a deep stare, studying our faces as we assured her that yes, we certainly would.

"Good", she concluded, "thanks for your time"

While walking out of her office I wondered if I had misheard her statement, because as far as I could remember she had never thanked anybody for their time before.

Chapter 46

"Do you guys wasn't to go to the cafeteria?", I asked as soon as we left McMurrich's office

"Let's go", said Alice, and Brad followed

We waited for the elevator without speaking. "I am awfully disappointed", I said when we got in

"I know", agreed Alice, dropping her head

"I wonder if Mike made up the whole story about Sandeep being scared and not wanting us to go to the cross cancer institute"

"Yeah...", said Brad, who had been silent up to that moment

"What about going there again to see if he was making it all up?", suggested Alice

"That's what I thought", I nodded

"But if all three of us disappear for a moment too long McMurrich is going to wonder", worried Brad

"It's lunch time, right?", I said looking at my watch

"So if we go now McMurrich will assume we headed for lunch", Alice said, brightening up

"Bingo!", I said

"Ok...", conceded Brad, somewhat unsure it was a good idea but not finding strong reasons not to go

"And we'll stop at the Greaser to grab a fat slice of junky pizza on our way back so we won't go hungry", I smiled

"Sounds like a plan", Alice smiled back

The elevator opened the door to the main floor

"But does anybody have their car keys with them?", Brad asked

"Oops...", I said shaking my head

"I can run upstairs get mine", offered Alice

"It's fine, I'll go. You guys can start heading to the parking lot, I'll be back in a moment", Brad said

We went outside and the burning hot asphalt yielded under our weight

"It feels good to be outside", said Alice, turning her head up, the sun showering over her closed eyes

"Yeah, FoodTech is a sick place. I still cannot believe what is happening. Why did Mike do that?", I said

"I don't know Iris. A part of me refuses to believe things are as they appear...", Alice told me, keeping her head tilted upwards

"What do you mean?", I asked

"I mean that perhaps Mike didn't intend to betray us at all", she said, looking at me now

"I thought so to. But then why not talk to us?"

"Mike was never the talkative type. Maybe he has a plan, but he didn't want to involve us"

I pondered the possibility and nodded. "It's not impossible"

I saw Brad walking out the entrance and waved at him as if I hadn't been seeing him for a while. The exuberance with which I was waiving my arms should have called for laughter, or at least a shy gest of recognition. But Brad walked towards us seriously, and when he got closer I saw the frown on his face.

"What?", I asked

"I think you were right", he said

I looked at him with a question mark on my face

"Someone *is* trying to dig in your stuff"

"McMurrich?", I asked, feeling all of a sudden it was way too hot outside

"No, the cleaning lady"

I burst out laughing.

"She is trying to steal my pens or what?!", I exclaimed relieved

"I don't think so", Brad replied, and the worry on his face extinguished my smile

"Explain then"

"I cannot be sure of what I saw, but she was where our desks are and when she heard me coming she started"

"Maybe her thoughts were elsewhere and you startled her?", Alice suggested

"No...I don't think so. I cannot say why, but I have a strong feeling she was up to something. And it's not only your activity she wants to know, probably she is interested in mine too..."

"What do you mean?", asked Alice

"There was something with my desk...it felt like something had been moved"

"That's exactly how I felt", I confirmed

"But why would a cleaning lady be sticking her nose in your files?", Alice asked

"I don't know...", I said, shaking my head

"It seems like a crazy idea but I wonder if she is not who she pretends she is", Brad said

"I wouldn't believe what is happening if someone told me..."

"Ok guys, why don't we deal with one thing at a time and head to the cross cancer institute now?", Alice interrupted

Brad opened the car, "Right, let's go, we don't have much time"

Chapter 47

At the cross cancer institute the receptionist told us she hadn't seen Sandeep for a few days, he was sick, she explained, and when asked when he would be back she said she wasn't sure.

"And what about Wilhelm Larson?"

She looked at us nervously, short of excuses, but while she was brainstorming to find another good one Wilhelm Larson entered the front door, carrying a McDonalds lunch-bag.

"Hello, I wondered where you guys were. We run those tests for you and I was expecting to see you back", he said smiling

Brad and I looked at each other, equally perplexed and wondering what to say. I knew Wilhelm noticed, because a frown clouded his face for a moment, but then he smiled again and said "I can show you the results"

Either Wilhelm was a great actor or our conclusions about him menacing Sandeep were wrong, because he didn't seem to want to avoid us in any way. But then what was the point since he had no chance of avoiding us? Better pretend he was expecting us so that we wouldn't get suspicious.

"That would be great, thank you. This is actually what we came for, I'm sorry we didn't phone you in advance", I said, catching up.

"I'm Alice by the way", said Alice tending her hand

"I'm working with Iris and Brad on this project, so they thought I could come along"

"Good to meet you", said Wilhelm, smiling again.

I noticed he was smiling more than he had last time, and wondered if his smiles were a way to cover up something or if was in a genuinely good mood.

"I see you haven't had your lunch yet...", continued Alice

"Don't worry about it, my lunch gets interrupted all the time and showing you the results won't take too long anyways", interrupted Wilhelm, looking at Alice with open interest

Did he find Alice attractive? I wondered if the explanation of the change in his manners was as simple as that.

"Do you want to go upstairs to the lab for the results?", he said after a moment, taking a step towards the elevator.

"Sure", said Brad, speaking for the first time since we met Wilhelm

As we waited for the elevator in silence, I mentally debated if I should ask him for Sandeep. Why hadn't he asked if we spoke with him? After all Sandeep was the one who had introduced us first, so the question would have been legitimate and expected.

"We should have phoned Sandeep, but we were swamped these days. You know how it gets hectic at times...", Brad dropped casually, as if reading my thoughts

Wilhelm didn't reply, and I added, "The receptionist told us he is sick, I was sorry to hear that"

Wilhelm looked confused for a moment.

"It's no problem for me to show you the results", he finally said

When we entered the lab it felt larger than it had the previous time, and the colour of the walls seemed tinged with a hideous shade of grey I hadn't noticed when I was there earlier. My mind floundered in twisted elucubrations of how moods can affect the way we view places, and I leafed through past recollections of cases when known places had seemed suddenly different and unfamiliar. I wondered how I would feel going back through the town where I was born and raised before moving to NY. The short tune announcing that the computer had started awakened me to reality. *Focus*, I told myself.

Wilhelm looked at the screen, looking perplexed.

"I remember your folder was on the desktop", he said

He opened windows explorer, "Unless it was moved somewhere else..."

I observed him, reading the names of the folders as he browsed. There were acronyms, and user names, and few clear labels "Leukocytes", "Protein_Analyses_John", "Modified_Starch", but not our folder. Wilhelm frowned.

"I have no clue, I don't understand where your data are", he said

He stared at the screen a while longer, then repeated, "I don't understand where your data are"

Brad, Alice and I sat silently, waiting for Wilhelm to make the next move.

"Sorry", he said at last

We looked at him, and I hoped he would say something like, "I'll call Sandeep to ask him if he knows". That would have been a normal reaction, since who else would have moved our folder?

"I'll try to find out and let you know once I know something", he said instead

"Do you have our contact information?", asked Alice

"I think I do, but why don't you give it to me again, just in case..."

We did, and Wilhelm accompanied us to the elevators apologizing once more and reiterated he would phone us back.

"Quite odd", I said once the doors of the elevator closed

"Very", said Alice, marking her words

"I should have listened to you earlier", Brad told me

I shrugged.

"Let's go buy our well-deserved greasy pizza slice and think with a full stomach", I said.

I wasn't hungry and I don't think Alice and Brad were either, but we all agreed cheerfully in a collective attempt of calm and normality.

Chapter 48

The Greaser was at the corner between 105 Ave and 106 Street, and whenever the traffic light turned red I would glance at the people waiting to roll again: impatient ladies nibbling on their nails, afros moving at the rhythm of the songs pumping from their stereos, men in their suits, windows up and AC on, and easy going boys in second hand cars, some happy some worried. Sometimes I would get noticed looking, and I would lower my eyes, or perhaps smile.

"Why do you stare people down?", asked Brad

I shrugged, "I don't stare them down on purpose, we are facing the window and these guys are just there in front of us..."

"So what do we do now?", Alice interrupted

"Let me call Mariam Avery, I should go see her tonight and fill her in on the last events"

"I made an appointment with her, why don't you tag along?"

"When did you make it?", I asked

"I called her after we spoke in the cafeteria, you remember?", Brad told me

"I know, what I meant is when are you going to see her"

"Oh, at 7 tonight"

"Perhaps I could tag along along?", asked Alice

"Why not? I don't know what Avery is going to think about the fact that she'll see three people show up when she expected only me, but...", said Brad shrugging

"I'll come", said Alice

I was taking another bite of my pizza when the traffic light went red. A white Audi stopped, and I looked at the car before noticing its passengers.

"Nice car", I said

"Better than my Hyundai", Brad commented

"Guys...", Alice whispered

"What?", I asked looking at her

"Did you see who's in that car?"

"McMurrich", said Brad, his pizza slice suspended halfway in the air

"McMurrich *and* Mark", I said, my eyes magnetized to the couple in the car

"Don't stare Iris", Brad said

“Who’s Mark?”, Alice asked, looking at me

“We went to the DNA center to run some analyses on our samples, McMurrich put us in contact with Mark and he helped us with that”

I glanced out the window and saw McMurrich lean towards Mark, just slightly, and smile a sly flirtatious smile I had never seen on her before.

“Do you think they have an affair?”, I asked

“I think so...”, Alice said, taking a quick glance at the two

The light turned green and the Audi started. It was already past the traffic light when I saw McMurrich turn for a brief second and look in our direction, and I wondered if she saw us.

“Let’s hope not”, Brad said shaking his head when I asked

“Let’s go back guys, there’s work to do”, Alice said, getting up

“It seems like you have an idea in mind”, I replied, collecting my carton and napkins

“McMurrich asked me to order a bunch of different types of cells, antibodies and proteins to test what the polymer does to them. I don’t know what this will lead to, but I must do it since the boss asked”

“And I will try to do some more research before leaving for Milan”

“Leaving for Milan?”, Alice exclaimed, eyes wide and eyebrows arched

“Let’s go, I’ll tell you on our way back”

Chapter 49

“So what did McMurrich say?”, Alice asked after I finished telling her about my decision to fly out to Milan

“She wasn’t happy but she agreed...she had no choice, I told her my relative was dying”

“Did you?”, Alice laughed

“Well yes...”

“Cool strategy!”

“Yeah, but I will have to inform her about the exact day I am leaving. I booked my flight for Thursday night, which really means that I can only work until Thursday morning...”

“So you are leaving in three days...WOW!”

“I know, I can’t decide if I am excited or scared”

“You’ll be fine Iris”, said Brad, taking his eyes off the road for a moment to smile at me

“Thanks buddy”, I smiled back

Brad shifted his eyes back to the road and turned on the radio. A reggae tune was playing and we all began moving to the rhythm of the music. We were singing along with Bob Marley when Brad checked the rearview mirror and frowned.

"What's wrong?", I asked

"Look on the right lane"

"The white car?"

"No, the black ford behind it"

"What about it?", said Alice

"Look at the woman driving it, doesn't she look like the cleaning lady we met in the cafeteria?", Brad said, looking at me

"The same cleaning lady who was digging in your files?", asked Alice, her voice faint

"Yes", I nodded

"I think she has been following us all along", said Brad

"Did you see her car before?"

"I noticed it when we left the Greaser, but I hadn't realized who was driving it", he told me

"There's an exit in 300 meters, take it", said Alice from the back seat, leaning her head between Brad's and mine.

Brad slowed down and the Ford slowed down too. He slowed further, swerved to the right lane and to the exit, while an angry gang of horns yelled behind us. The focus swerved too, and took the exit. Brad accelerated but the menacing black profile tagged us closely.

"Oh my god", whispered Alice

"Hold on, I'll try to leave them behind"

We were running on a side street now, with nobody in sight. I wondered how long we could go before the cleaning lady and her partner reached us.

A red spy began to blink.

"The car is overheating now?!", Brad yelled

"Don't worry, just keep going", I said as calmly as I could, but I was shaking

There was a loud bang, and the car swayed. I covered my head.

"What the hell!!!", Brad shouted

"They are shooting at us!", yelled Alice

Brad raced our car through a curve, clinging on the steering wheel, his neck craned forward. We heard the sound of a siren, which mingled to Bob Marley's relaxed voice singing "cheer you up" on the background and the hoarse sound of the motor, which was now smoking.

Alice looked around frantically, “Where’s the police?”

And when Alice said it, “Where’s the police?”, I realized the obvious move, I pulled out my cell and punched 911, my hands shaking.

“Please help, we are...”, I started, but I couldn’t finish because there was another bang and we swerved off the road, the tires blowing dust off the dried skin of California.

A sound resonated in my skull. There was a moment of pain on my forehead and a voice buzzing on the background

“Hello, can you hear me?”

“Hello?”

I wanted to reply but I couldn’t, and then there was nothing but blackness.

Chapter 50

The cathedral was shining in its white embroidered beauty on a blue sky.

“This is magnificent”, I heard Jack say

I turned around and smiled in surprise, “You’re here!”

“What do you mean?”, Jack said arching his brows

“When did you get here?”, I asked

“I’ve always been here. Are you all right?”

I burst out laughing and grasping Jack’s hand I tugged him to the cathedral

“Let’s go see what’s inside!”, I exclaimed

But the doors were closed

“So?”, asked Jack

“So, what about gelato? My mouth is watering already”

He smiled and humored me, following me along to an ice cream shop. I couldn’t see the inside, because the glasses on the front were satin, with some transparent stylized flowers as decorations. When I walked in the place was white and grey, like FoodTech labs I thought. I turned around towards Jack, wondering if we should pick a better spot. But before I could ask the man at the counter addressed me

“Hello Iris”, he said smiling

He was a middle aged man, austere handsome.

“How do you know me?”, I asked, pondering his outfit while he smiled a moment longer before answering.

He was wearing a lab coat on top of a button up shirt and suit pants, and when the thought he couldn’t be an ice cream man dawned on me I looked down at where the ice cream trays should have been and saw Petri dishes with bacterial cultures instead.

"I am Mauro Mori, good to meet you", he said, coming on the other side of the desk to greet me

A cleaning lady walked out the back and eyed me

"Who is she?", Jack asked

"I don't know...I can't remember", I said. I felt the anguish foam within me without knowing why

Mori looked at her, bugging his eyes, while she kept at her task, wiping the same spot on the floor as if it was soiled by a terribly persistent stain, her eyes low on the floor now.

Mori considered her for a while longer, and then a flash of recognition crossed his face, he frowned and tapped his hand on the desk hard and I gasped in scared surprise

"Enough!", he yelled, and then again, "Enough!"

But the cleaning lady continued wiping the invisible stain, and fear crossed Mori's face too. He was silent for a moment, his forehead corrugated by a flow of thoughts

"Run!", he said at last, with a great urgency in his tone

"Where?", I asked, inexplicably calm now

"Run!", he iterated

Jack took my hand and said, "Let's go"

We were running against the wind, all of a sudden strong now, so that no matter how hard we tried, it was hard to move. Tears were running from our eyes and I was about to bail out when the wind changed its direction and began blowing on our backs. We ran fast and faster, with the air pushing us beyond our own steps, and finally we were in the air, floating few meters from the asphalt, then above the rooftops, and higher still, till we poked the clouds and were out in the pureness of the blue. The sun was bright, and as we were propelled upwards its light became blinding

"Jack?", I called

I saw a fleck of his smile, till the sound of the wind and the ignited ball of the sun and the beat of my heart melt in a white, motionless, immensity.

Chapter 51

I opened my eyes slightly, feeling my eyelids unglue with effort and itch, and a smudged whiteness appeared between the debris fogging my view.

I tried to lift my hand but I couldn't, although something moved, a finger maybe. A great heaviness held me down, but I felt peaceful.

"Iris", I heard, feeling a reassuring hand on mine

"Iris", I heard again, and this time I knew it was Jack.

I tried to smile, but my lips were glued too. I felt a wisp of moisture wet them and then a faint taste of salt. I licked them, my taste was numbed but I guessed my lips had cracked, and were bleeding now.

“Hello”, I said, and was surprised at the sound of my own voice

“Hello”, Jack said, tears pooling in his eyes

I twitched my partially unglued lips in a tentative smile, “I am happy”

“I am happy too”, Jack said, wiping his tears

I looked around the room, and it was only after inspecting it that I fully realized I was in a hospital. The machine at the side of my bed recorded the acceleration of my heart, and a nurse – I hadn’t noticed her – took my arm, a syringe at hand.

“Why?”, I asked

“You have to rest”

Her features blurred into the face of the cleaning lady, and I gasped, pulling away my arm. She stopped, and when I looked at her again the cleaning lady was gone.

“Where are Alice and Brad?”, I asked, turning to Jack

“They are fine”

“Are they here too?”

“Brad is at home already, Alice is conscious but she is under observation in another hospital. Brad came here to see you and he told me”

I nodded and gave my arm to the nurse. “What are you giving me?”

“A tranquillizer”

“I am calm already, I don’t want it”

“As you wish”, she said, capping the syringe and placing it on the tray at the side of my bed

“How long have I been unconscious?”

“The accident happened yesterday after lunch and it’s 10 am now”, Brad explained

“Let me know if you need anything, I will drop by later to see how you are doing. You can probably leave tomorrow, but you must make sure you rest”, the nurse said, excusing herself

I nodded, and waited for her to leave. When I heard the door clack close behind her I turned to Jack, and looked at him for a moment.

“I need to fly to Italy on Friday”, I said at last, feeling my thoughts accelerate and my mind pace faster each second.

“What?!”, he exclaimed

“I need to see Mori, I must understand what the polymer can cause and why if I want to confine the damages it is producing”

“You are not in the condition to travel”

“I must go”

“But you have been knocked unconscious and are still in a hospital bed!”

“Will you come with me?”

“I will come with you all the way to the moon, but not before you shape up. Anyways, why Friday?”

“Because I booked the ticket already, and told my boss that I was leaving for a family emergency”

“When did you decide all this?”

“Yesterday morning”, I said, and explained what happened till our car crashed and I blanked out

“Will you come? I dreamed you were with me...”

Jack observed me, and transfixed his eyes into mine, as to find the root of the intuition that made me want to walk out of this bed to an airport, bringing him along. I held his gaze, till I saw a breach open within him and a smile crack the worried look on his face.

“I don’t know why I am letting you talk me into this craziness”, he said at last, shaking his head

“Because you love me, and deep down you know that if you were me you’d act exactly like I am doing now”

“Sure”, Jack laughed

“Let me go home to buy the ticket, it won’t be easy to find one to leave in two days”

“Go on Foodtech’s website, login with my credentials and open my emails to find my reservation. Book a seat on my same flight, I’m sure you’ll find a spot”, I said

He frowned, tilting his head slightly, his mouth bent in a questioning smile

“My user is icelati and my password is jacko1...”

“Jacko1?”

I winked mischievously and Jack shook his head again

“Ok, I’ll come back soon”, he said, pushing himself up from the chair and slapping me in a gest of teasing reproach.

Chapter 52

When the door closed behind Jack I lay back, looking at the ceiling. The thoughts floated in my mind, a myriad of them, all somehow incomplete. The excitement preceding departures bubbled inside me, troubled by the anxiousness of the accident, by the feeling my mind was unbearably slow in retrieving information and remembering what I had to do, and by the fact that I was pinned in bed.

The nurse came by bringing a hot cup of tea. “This will do you good”, she said with a smile

I thanked her, and asked if she could bring me a paper and a pen. She said “sure”, after recommending again that I rest. It seemed to me she was treating me like an invalid, and a chill passed through my spine thinking about the brain-annihilating treatments they used in the past for those considered crazy.

"I'm with you in Rockland...", I recited in my mind and figured, a moment later, that it was a line from the *Howl* by Ginsberg. I began sipping the tea. The first sip was tasteless, the second one was bitter, with a metal after-taste. I grimaced and placed the cup on the side table.

The nurse came back with pen and paper, and I inclined the bed so that I was in a partially upright position. But when I could finally write down the ramble of my sparse thoughts to put some order in them I had the writer's block, and my mind went blank. I closed my eyes, trying to recollect my ideas. The dream. I retrieved the details of one image and wrote them. I closed my eyes again, and I recalled some more. And after that the pen flew easily, taking possession of the paper's blank emptiness. I was still writing when there was a knock on the door, and the nurse came in with a displeased hint hang on her face.

"You have a visitor", she said, letting in Mariam Avery

"Our patient woke up this morning, I would ask you to be considerate"

"I just need few moments, thank you", Detective Avery said with a tone that did not accept discussion

The nurse nodded, and shadowed away with seamless steps.

"Thank you for coming", I said, genuinely relieved by the fact that I could check out some items off my to-do list before leaving the hospital.

I knew I had to drop by and talk to her before taking off, but given the circumstances I hardly had enough time to pack.

"How are you feeling?", she asked

"Confused"

She nodded and sat beside my bed.

"Did you see who was in the car"

"Yes", I said, and told her about the cleaning lady, and about my suspicion that she had been after me well before I noticed it, trying to access my computer. Detective Avery scribbled some notes on her pad, then looked at me shaking her head.

"Do you have a gut feeling about who sent her over?"

This hardly sounded like the question from a detective, and I looked at her with what she misinterpreted as a scared expression

"You are not judging anybody in court, I am just asking you for an opinion"

"Well, the people at the Cross cancer institute are acting quite odd", I said, and filled her in with the details I thought she still didn't know about

She nodded in a way that told me she knew already

"You spoke with Brad?"

She nodded again, "And with your other colleague"

“Alice”

“Yes”

“What about your boss”

“There was an inspection before our accident, and she was nervous, but just because she is a control-freak and hates interference. You sent the inspection, right?”

“I make my checks”, she replied coolly

“When you made your checks, did you find anything about Mike?”, I asked

“The same Mike who you said is somewhat involved in the polymer project?”, she asked, bugging her eyes just slightly

“Yes, him”, I said

“Why are you asking?”, she said, bugging her eyes a bit more

I told her what I heard from McMurrich

“And you think McMurrich was giving you a honest account of the facts?”, Avery asked

“Yes...yes”, I mumbled, considering for the first time that maybe McMurrich was making it all up

“I mean, she seemed genuinely worried...”, I continued

“Ok, I will look in this”

“Please, thank you. I need to know...personally. I cannot accept that Mike was manipulating us”, I said

Avery looked at me without replying, and there was a pause in the conversation.

“I am leaving for Italy on Friday”, I said abruptly, breaking the silence

Mariam Avery arched her brows, but before she could ask I gave her my account, with an abundance of technical details. I didn’t care if she was interested, I needed her to clarify my own ideas and kept talking to myself as much as I was talking to her. She let me speak, and the words were still pouring out when McMurrich walked in.

Her eyes fell on me first, and a second later on Detective Avery. Her face went pale and she took a step back, before recomposing herself and producing a forced smile.

“Hello Iris, knowing about the accident was such a shock”

“Thanks for coming”, I said, and Mariam Avery stood up, “Detective Avery”, she said, tending her hand

“Dr. McMurrich”, she replied, looking her fully confident self again

“It’s great you happened to come, I would care to have a word with you, if you don’t mind”, said Avery

“Unfortunately I have a full schedule this morning”

Mariam Avery nodded.

"Then come see me tomorrow morning at 9", she said, pulling out a business card from her pocket and handing it to my boss

McMurrich was about to raise an objection, but then swallowed it down and said, "I will try to make time"

Then, turning to me, "I look forward to seeing you in the lab"

"Thank you...I have to leave to see my relative though. I will be leaving this Friday"

"This Friday", she repeated

"Yes..."

"Get well and have a safe trip", she replied curtly, heading towards the door

"Thank you", I said

"See you tomorrow morning", said Avery

McMurrich nodded, and let the door shut close behind her. Avery looked at the door for a moment.

"Your boss didn't look too cool about seeing me", she said

"I noticed"

"But you haven't seen anything odd in her behaviour lately"

"There is always something odd in her behaviour, but if you are asking me if things got worse the answer is no"

Avery pondered my answer for a moment, then asked, "Did you lie about your reasons for leaving?"

"Of course, I had to, or else she would never allow me to go. I implied I am going to see a dying relative..."

"Why would she not let you go?"

The question sounded stupid to me.

"What do you mean?", I asked

"Is she worried that you might discover something you shouldn't discover?"

"I don't think so. She is probably more worried about other people knowing what's going on in the lab and maybe stealing the idea of a new product she finds extremely promising. She wanted to sell the polymer..."

"Does she still want to?"

"I don't know, many resources have gone into this research and..."

The nurse knocked and walked into the room, cutting my sentence in half

"Sorry to interrupt, but our patient needs to rest", she said, repeating her usual innuendo

"Sure, we are done here", Avery replied.

"If anything comes up contact me, and in any case we'll talk when you get", she added, addressing me

"I'll tell you what I find, if I will find or remember anything", I replied, and realized from the familiarity in my tone that I liked Avery. Odd how sometimes our gestures and words reveal to us how we feel before we process our hidden perceptions, I thought.

She left me with a smile, while the nurse came around to my side table to get the cup of tea that had turned cold.

"Do you want some more tea?", she asked

I shook my head and closed my eyes, hoping she would go. When I heard the door click softly I knew she had, and I felt strangely happy. I let myself float, and finally I fell asleep again, the papers filled with my past dream still lying beside me.

Chapter 53

I awoke to the smell of food and voices in the hallway, with the light pouring in the room through the blinds. I remembered Jack had told me it was 10 am, and if this was lunch time I calculated that I had slept more or less a couple of hours. My biological clock was out of whack, and I wish they had one on the wall to guide me through the day. My face felt swollen from the long sleep and I felt unnerved to be stuck in bed, when I could probably get up and walk. I was looking at the tubing leaking intravenous liquid into my body and pondering when they would remove it, when the nurse came in with food on her cart.

"I have lunch for you", she said

I looked at the soup and pureed fruit sitting on the cart, and thought by contrast at the slice we had at the Greaser. The greasy pizza slice seemed centuries away and the idea of getting on a plane to Italy in two days seemed equally remote. Perhaps it was. Would they let me get out of there?

I smiled, trying to act as civil as possible and to hide the distaste I had for this obtusely caring nurse.

"Thanks for bringing lunch"

"You're very welcome", she said in a plain professional tone

"I was wondering if I still need the intravenous fluid, since I am starting to eat..."

"As a matter of fact you don't. I can remove it now if you wish"

"That would be sweet", I said, and suddenly felt a rush of fear run through my stomach at the idea of the needle being fiddled around with to be removed.

I have a quite high tolerance to pain, but clinics have always made me nervous and hostile and anxious. A flash of the ambulance carrying me to the hospital as a kid ran through my memory. A nurse, taking a seat beside me and holding my hand. Her pitying eyes laid on me.

"Iris, you are a survivor. Your family did not make it, but you must"

My numbness, my eyes shut.

"Are you tired?", the nurse asked, dragging me from the past

“No. Can you please remove the tubes?”, I asked, without opening my eyes.

“Sure, you might just feel a pinch when I take off the tape”

I nodded

The nurse was good at her job, and I just felt the tape stripped off my arm, just a pinch.

“When will I be able to leave?”

“You don’t have broken bones, your brain and organs have not been damaged in the impact. We’ll run a few more tests this afternoon, and if we don’t find any anomalies you can probably leave tomorrow morning. A doctor will pass by to talk with you later. But remember that even when you leave the clinic you will have to rest”

Of course, I thought, I will have to rest.

I nodded, and began lapping up the soup she had brought me. It was like thickened water, there was no taste to the low density, whitish liquid in my dish.

“Enjoy your lunch”, she said

“You bet”, I replied laughing, softly at first, then loud and heartily after the nurse had left the room, looking at me with faint surprise.

Chapter 54

After lunch the doctor came to see me, and guided me through the tests, handing me to different nurses and technicians who were luckily not as zealous as the nurse who had me in charge earlier. They gave me instructions, smiled, cracked a few jokes and kept me busy for the afternoon. When the round of tests was finished he accompanied back to my room. He had pushed me out of my room on a wheelchair, but I was walking around now, wrapped in a vest the hospital had given me. I was reluctant to admit it, but I felt weak and I longed for the bed in which I had been tossing and twitching during the morning.

I moved away the sheets and let myself drop on it as soon as I reached the room, enjoying the firm touch of the mattress but wishing I could be in the familiar smell of my own room at home. Where was Jack by the way?

“Everything looks good, you can leave as early as tomorrow morning”, the doctor said, interrupting my thoughts

“Thank you”, I replied, forcing myself to feel happy

I was about to ask the doctor if he knew about any visits while I was taking the tests when there was a knock on the door and my nurse stepped in announcing I had visitors.

“Hey!”, I exclaimed when I saw Jack and Brad timidly peaking in the room, side by side behind the nurse

“Hey Iris”, greeted me Brad, while Jack mimed a plane and pulled out a ticket, smiling in a childish mischievous way that got me laughing loud

Brad looked at me surprised not understanding our coded conversation

"I'll let you guys have fun", said the doctor winking at us

I liked the guy, he conveyed friendliness in few words, with a frank expression and warm eyes

"I'll pass by tomorrow before you leave", he added standing at the door, lifting his hand in farewell.

"Jack will come with me to Italy", I explained when the door clacked shut

"You must really love her to indulge her craziness", Brad said, and Jack replied with a shrug, smiling

"How did you guys meet, by the way?", I asked intrigued

"I heard Brad ask about you at the reception, and since I was coming here to see you I dragged him along"

"I came to see how you were doing but I also need to tell you what I saw today...things are taking a weirder turn every moment", Brad said

"What happened?"

"I was driving Alice home earlier..."

"Alice is home now?", I interrupted, relieved to hear the news

"Ehm-uhm", Brad nodded

"But which car did you drive?"

"I am renting one for now"

"Ok, so what were you saying happened?"

"So yes, I was driving Alice home when I saw Sandeep walking in the street"

"And?"

"Well, it was the middle of the day, so I found it strange that he was around instead of being at work"

"Ok..."

"But the weird part is that your neighbour was walking in front of him"

"John?", I asked surprised

"Well, I don't know if that's his name, but I am talking about the man who lives next door to you"

"And how do you know him?"

"I didn't realize who he was at first. His face looked familiar, but I couldn't quite remember where I had seen it. I wanted to understand where Sandeep was going though, so I turned the corner and re-entered the street, driving slowly so that I could follow him from a distance. I saw your neighbour enter a restaurant, followed by Sandeep, so I parked the car and waited outside. They came out half hour later, and it was then that I recalled the guy. I had seen him one day I day I drove you at home, he was out playing with his boy and the dog. The question is: what was he doing with Sandeep? And why were they trying to hide the fact that they were together?"

I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the sense of vertigo. I had suspected his wife had discovered he was having an affair, and had given him an ultimatum, either pack and change city or be responsible for the breakdown of a happy family life. But what if it was worse than that? Was he leaving because he had somehow a part in what was happening? And did Mariam Avery know?

"We should call Avery", I said

"Alice and I stopped to talk with her already"

"And what was her reaction?", asked Jack

"She pulled up on the computer a picture of the guy ...of John, and asked me to confirm he was the one we had seen. When we said he was she frowned, and asked us to have a second look at the picture. When we repeated we were sure the guy in the photo was the one we had seen she turned the screen towards her and looked at the picture herself, as if she might get some answers from it. She looked distressed for a moment, and then she let us go, angrily almost, telling us to call her if we saw anything that might be important"

I felt distressed and angry myself, and I was tempted to walk out of my bed now, knock on the Wheelers door and ask John to tell me what was happening.

"Do you think Sandeep is asking John for help?", I wondered out loud

"But why John? How does Sandeep even know he is a detective? And why in private, instead of just going to the police station?", said Jack

"Maybe he thinks he is followed and doesn't want to be seen walking into the police station...", I said hopefully, not wanting to believe John was corrupted

"I don't know Iris, it didn't seem to me like Sandeep was looking for help. He didn't look scared, for one thing. Now that I think about it John seemed the anxious one between the two..."

"I don't understand any of this", I sighed

There was a knock on the door, and the nurse came in with another soup and a dish of unattractive boiled vegetables.

"I brought you dinner", she told me, and then, to Jack and Brad, "The time for the visits is actually over..."

"I'll come pick you up tomorrow morning", Jack said

"And I'll give you a call before you leave", added Brad

"Thanks guys", I said, not wanting to let them go and wishing I could fall quickly in a dreamless sleep till the next morning

But I had slept too much already and accumulated too much anxiousness for that to happen. So after eating my tasteless meal and washing myself I lay awake in bed, my feet and hand moist with perspiration, watching the end of the day consume itself into the night, and the night fade into the

dawn. The sleep took me when the day was rising, nauseous and dizzy from tossing listlessly in the crumpled linens.

Chapter 55

"Iris..."

I heard Jack's voice through a veil of sleep

"Iris, hey...", I heard again, and felt his hand caressing my arm.

"Come here with me...", I mumbled

"Hey, we have to go home"

I opened my eyes and saw the whiteness of the room. I was at the hospital and I needed to go home, pack, get ready for tomorrow.

"Jack...I forgot where I was", I said, raising my eyes

"I figured you had", he laughed, giving me a hand to help me up

"I collected your things and the doctor has signed the documents already, so we can go..."

"Do you know where my clothing are?"

"I brought you one of my clean shirts", Jack told me with a half apologetic, half amused tone, pulling out a short sleeved button-up from a grocery shop plastic bag

"Ok, wait a moment for me to wash and dress", I said, laughing at the look and size of the shirt I would have to wear

The more I scrubbed, and moved and felt the water run on me, the healthier I felt, and I thought with anger at the nurse obsessively repeating "You should rest". Three days in this place had gotten me into a larval state, and now that I was beginning to move around the lymph of life was starting to flow in me again.

I stepped out of the bathroom fresh and energized

"Let's go! Ready?", I told Jack, tugging his hand playfully.

"Ready", he said smiling at me

We walked through the white air-conditioned hallways, and when the elevator opened to the reception I felt an exhilarating rush, an excitement for the world and I laughed.

"What?", Jack asked

"Nothing, I am just happy", I said

Jack shook his head and smiled, opening the doors for me. The air outside was burning hot and the light was intense, almost blinding when coming from inside.

"Boy, I had forgotten what summer feels like"

"There's no need to be so theatrical now, you've only been in the hospital for three day!", Jack said, but he was squinting too

"I know, but it's weird how I lost track of time...I could have been there for a week, or a month, or longer"

"What about we go have lunch at my place? I have everything packed already, so we can go to your house to prepare your luggage after lunch. Sounds?"

I nodded, and took Jack's hand, swinging it back and forth. I had forgotten how to be childish for a long time, but Jack was reviving the kid in me, the bubbly flow of cheerfulness, the carefree playfulness.

Chapter 56

When Jack and I reached my place after lunch it was about 3 in the afternoon, and John Wheeler should have been at work. But as Jack was pulling up in front of my house I saw him moving some boxes in the garage. He waved at me, and I waved back with the friendliest smile I could produce, but then I turned to Jack and gave him a meaningful look.

"I'll stop say hello to John", I said

Jack studied my face trying to guess what I had in mind, and I could see worry in his eyes. He kept them on me for a long moment, without speaking, because the windows of the car were open and John wasn't far from us.

I slipped out of the car before Jack turned off the engine, and said, "I'll be just a moment", handing him the keys of house.

But Jack walked towards my house and sat on the steps, his gaze following me.

"Hey John!", I exclaimed walking towards him

"Hello", he said, raising his eyes and wiping the sweat off his forehead with a towel

"Are you guys packing up already? We should have another get together before you leave. But you aren't leaving till the end of the month, right?"

"Yeah, but it takes a while to pack up a whole house"

"I hear you"

"I am home too today, just got out of the hospital..."

"Why, what happened?"

"I had a car accident, and induced car accident I would say...", I said, observing John's reaction carefully

"An induced car accident?", he asked, bugging his eyes, with an expression I couldn't fully decipher. He looked puzzled, but there was a hint of some other worry on his face. Or was I making this up?

"Someone literally tried to push us off the road", I continued

"And did you identify the car and the drivers?", he asked, his frown tracing deep lines between his eyebrows

“Not that well...”, I said vaguely, a rush of fear suddenly flooding the lower parts of my stomach

“But you must have seen something?”, he insisted, and I wondered again if his insistence was that of a policeman used to asking this type of questions or if there was something else behind it. Why would he be walking with Sandeep and trying to hide it if the two of them weren’t connected in dark ways?

“Not much...we were driving fast one moment and I was knocked unconscious the next...”

“Were you alone in the car?”, John asked

A normal question would have been “So how are you feeling now?”, but it hadn’t come yet and now the anger began to compete with the fear. I hoped John never tried to be an agent under cover, because if he was playing a hide and seek game his skills were terrible

“Thanks for asking me if I am doing well, by the way”, I said, with a pitch in my tone higher than I intended

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I cannot believe that someone pushed you out the road on purpose, why would anybody do that?”, he said, opening his arms in incredulity, making his solicitous neighbour act more credible. But was he acting?

“No clue”, I said lying

“Are you taking a few days off?”, John asked, his expression almost plain now, with only the hint of a frown

“Yes, Jack has a cottage close to the sea and we are going to spend a few days there”, I lied again, and I was surprised at the ease with which my answers came

“I never asked you by the way...you’re still going to be a policeman, aren’t you?”, I asked, trying to sound as casual and innocent as I could

Deeper frown lining John’s forehead

“Maybe you can help me figure out who tried to kill me once I get better”, I added

“Did you report this to the police?”

“Of course...they actually came to talk to me at the hospital, but you and I know each other well and I would rather have someone I trust investigate on this”

“Do you remember who you spoke to?”, John asked in return, eluding my question for the second time, and pressing me for more information instead

“Not really...”

“A woman or a man? Did they leave you their business card? I am asking because I know the people who work in the police, of course, and I can try to ask them if they are finding anything”

“So are you still going to be in the police? Are you just relocating to another office or changing job altogether?”, I asked, eluding John question and cornering him

“I’ll be with the police for another couple of weeks and then I’ll quit”

“Why are you quitting?”, I asked

“Because I am tired of seeing crime I suppose”, he said. I sensed a genuine note of surrender and disappointment in his voice, and saw sadness in his lowered eyes.

I nodded, wondering if I had misjudged him earlier, hoping I had

“I can understand that. And what are you going to do, John?”

“A simple administrative office job”, he said, shrugging

I nodded again, thinking at the contrast between John’s version of the facts and what his wife had been telling me when she announced their move, finally understanding his embarrassment, his silence and his lowered eyes throughout the evening. But why had she lied? Was it pride? Or had she been lied to? Certainly she would get to know his real income and eventually find out about his job.

“But why are you moving so far?”, I asked, feeling sorry to push him now, but too desperate to see clear through what was happening.

“If you change life you might as well do it in grand style, no?”, he shrugged, giving me a sad smile

“I suppose so”, I smiled, giving John a pat on the shoulder and waving again as I walked to my house, where Jack was waiting for me, still sitting on the steps, listening to the conversation from a distance.

Chapter 57

I opened the door and the dimness of my home’s atmosphere, filled with familiar smells, enveloped me.

“Do you trust John?”, Jack asked

“I still have to decide”, I said.

I looked around, it felt good to be home again.

“I wish I didn’t have to pack now, that we could be here for another day or two...”, I said

Jack shrugged and smiled, looking at me with sparks of warm eagerness in his eyes.

“It’s now or never, so let’s get your stuff packed and ready for tomorrow”, he said

“You are excited to go”, I said, stopping to observe him, my eyes fixed on his

He shrugged again, hiding a smile

“Why are you shy to tell me?”

“I am not shy”

“Ehm...let’s go pack”, I said, still looking at him, my lips bent in a mischievous smile now, ready to poke him again and free the flow of images he had in his mind, about Milan, and Italy and this trip, and let him rub me with the excitement of discovery the days at the hospital had denied me of.

I grabbed his hand and rushed up the steps, but when I was almost upstairs my head spun, and I had to stop, heart beating fast, pearls of sweat on my forehead, holding on to the handrail.

"Hey...", Jack said in a worried tone, wrapping an arm around my waist. My vision had gone black, and I let my body lean on him. After a moment the image of the room came back to me, bleached and flaky, and I smiled, trying to reassure him, feeling waves of cold and heat at each movement I made.

"I am fine, I just got dizzy for a moment..."

"Why don't you sit on the bed for a while", Jack said, walking me to my room, his arm still around my waist

"Nah, I am fine now, let's pack!", I said, with the rush of high following pain or physical discomfort

I've never been a careful packer, I throw in the luggage what occurs to my mind in less than half an hour, no matter where I am going and for how long. After all if I forget something I can either buy it or go without it. Apart from the documents and the money for the food and the hotel rooms nothing else is strictly necessary.

"Done", I said after a record time of 15 minutes

"Are you sure?", Jack said, tilting his head and arching his brows

"Yep. Do you want to go to the lake?"

"To the lake?!", Jack exclaimed, and then burst out laughing. "Why would we be going to the lake now after you just got out of the hospital and almost fainted less than half an hour ago?"

"I don't know...", I said, and I really didn't, but I felt the irrational urge to go, all of a sudden.

The picture of a dead body floating on the water flashed through my mind, and then a girl, the sweetness of her smile, and her eyes looking at me. I closed mine and shivered

"What is happening?"

"The girl drowned in the lake...who was she? Do you know what she looked like?"

"Why? All I read was a column on the paper...and her picture was black and white, poorly printed", Jack frowned

I walked to my studio and turned on the PC, punched in the password with febrile fingers. Jack followed me with a puzzled expression

"What are doing?"

"I want to find the column of the paper online and see a picture of the girl. She was Mirth's babysitter, Mirth told me about it that one time I met her at the lake"

"Mirth?"

"The detective's daughter, remember? I told you I had met her at the lake and she had said about how her nanny had died in the lake, drowned"

"Now I remember...so what about this girl?"

"I had a flash of a girl's face, and of a drowned body..."

Jack's frown deepened on his forehead, and he bugged his eyes, still not understanding what was going on in my mind. I didn't either as a matter of fact, all I knew was that my senses were alert, pretended towards this girl I had never met.

"Do you remember where you found the article?", I asked

Jack knelt beside me and ran few searches, while I sat on the edge of the chair, neck craned towards the screen, holding my breath.

"Here", he said at least

Tragedy at Hepburn Lake

On Monday night 23 years old Julie Larson was found drowned at Hepburn Lake. It was Mirth Morrison, a 10 years old kid, to make the dramatic discovery. Mirth walked out alone to the lake after waiting for Julie Larson, who was babysitting the kid during the evenings, and found Julie's body floating on the water, face down.

Julie Larson was a brilliant college student, apparently in good health, with no drug abuse or alcohol problems. Although the causes of the death still have to be ascertained, it is likely that a sudden illness caught her while she was swimming, resulting in the lethal accident.

The short description was followed by a picture. A girl, warm eyes and a sweet smile, light brown hair hastily gathered in a pony-tail. I looked at the familiar face I had never met but imagined, touched the screen seeking an impossible physical contact and wondered "Why?", out loud. Why did I know her, and why had she died...it was impossible to imagine the youth of those features gone, swollen by the crystalline water of the lake, swallowed by the earth.

"What are you wondering?", Jack asked after a moment

"I feel like I know her, do you see what I mean? Why? I never met her...can you see the strange pattern in the events? I go to the lake and meet Mirth one night, she tells me about this girl to whom I *know* I am connected. I know it in an irrational and intuitive way. Why did I picture her face now, coming out of the hospital? And your girlfriend? Her name is Julie too..."

"You are imagining too many things", Jack said, but there was a broken note in his words, a doubt he wanted to hush, a wound he did not want to re-open.

"Can we go to the lake?", I said, turning my face up to Jack.

I seldom saw him from this angle, and it felt reassuring to be looking up at him from below, it filled me with a sense of protection and sheltering warmth. Jack looked back at me for a moment, then he twitched his brows in an expression I had never received from him before, of indulgent tenderness, like the one a mother could have for her kid.

"Sure Iris, but we are going to swim close to the shore, if at all"

"Absolutely", I smiled, suddenly happy, shoved by the intensity of alternating moods and sensations, feeling extremely alive.

Chapter 58

It was late afternoon when we stepped out of my home, and opening the door I realized that plump dark clouds had crowded in the sky, suspending the burned summer air with the promise of a violent outburst of rain. I looked up smiling, enjoying the exhilarating feeling that precedes and follows summer storms, the strange expectation of some sort of revelation or unexpected change, the sense of freshness and freedom.

"It will probably start pouring while we are out", Jack said

"Yes", I agreed, still looking up

"And the idea of getting soaked under the summer rain attracts you so, doesn't it?", Jack asked, brushing me with a sly look

I laughed heartily spreading out my arms, palms upwards, eyes turned towards the turgid sky. Jack began laughing too, I knew he felt the way I did, and I loved him for that.

He started the truck and we drove in silence, sharing the earthly sensation of the moment and looking at each other now and then. I fluctuated between Jack's smile and the landscape, leaning out from the window, the moist air flapping against my skin and sticking to it, warm and summer-scented.

"Let's drive to your coast", I said, remembering when Jack had driven me to the shore of the lake opposite to the one where I usually swam.

Jack turned to me and nodded, and after a while I recognized the unpaved path few hundred meters from the shore where he had brought me before. The trees surrounded us from both sides, twisted roots poking the earth, exuding their smell. We parked and the sky shook with a baritone bellowing, but still held the rain within itself. I ran towards the lake in the small trail in the woods, not waiting for Jack who was locking the truck

"Hey", he yelled behind me, chasing me along and playfully, tugging my shirt when he caught up with me

I stopped and turned to him with a grin, then ran on towards the lake, giggling wildly. The view of the water opened in front of me after the tunnel between the trees like a surrealistic painting, the clouds dark and the water dark from their reflection, but the air in between the two masses of darkness strangely animated by some sort of unexplainable light.

We took off our shoes and sat on the rocks, thunders multiplying and lightning flashing at a distance, landing somewhere among the woods.

And then the rain broke. Plump drops thumping, dry grains flying off the ground, soil pierced by the drops, water penetrating the pores of the land, drops hitting the lake, water against water, drops thickening, streaming in rivulets from the sky. Water in our hair, clothing and body, our feet dipped down into the lake, our hands and faces upwards, our mouths and eyes open in laughter, drinking the pure refreshing outburst pouring on us like sobs of relief.

It probably last less than half an hour, and we took it all in, without ever thinking to leave. When the rain stopped we were soaked to the bones. It was then that I looked to the other shore, and saw Mirth

walking towards the lake, opposite to our shore, the dog following her closely. She approached the water, and stood there for a moment, still, letting the rain soak her like we did, observing us. Then she raised her hand and waved, but before I could tell Jack that we should drive to the other coast and give her a ride back home she turned away, walking into the woods with the dog at her side.

Jack saw the surprise on my face, the touch of worry. He shrugged.

"All is fine. What about heading home?", he said, and lead me to the truck, my hand into his.

Chapter 59

We showered together when we got home, lingering under the crystalline liquid again as long as the supplies of hot water from the old boiler allowed us, and rushed out laughing and cursing when it suddenly began to pour on us cold. We were rubbing each other dry when the phone rang.

"Ah no...", I said, not wanting to talk to anybody but Jack for reasons I could not tell

"You'd better go...", said Jack, pushing me out of the bathroom with a slight slap

I wrapped myself in the towel and went to pick up the phone, sighting.

"Iris? Am I annoying you?", I heard Christine say on the other end of the line

"Not at all", I said, partly lying but feeling a slight positive shift in my disposition

"Sure? You seemed unhappy when you answered the phone...", Christine replied hesitantly, before adding, "But I have news to tell you!", her tone turning excited, and all traces of worry about my mood vanishing

"What's up?", I asked

"I figured the police is investigating about the deaths at the NY cancer center hospital...some information leaked, and I heard from unofficial sources that the cross cancer institute is also under investigation. Now I know for a fact that there is a suspicious collaboration between the two institutes just as I expected all along, although I am missing many details and I haven't pinned down any name yet. I tried to find the names you gave me, those Sandeep and Wilhelm guys, to know if they were involved in any collaborative project with the NY cancer institute but I couldn't find them. The investigation is ongoing and the police is trying to keep it strictly confidential, don't you worry though, just give me a bit more time and I'll get there!", Christine spoke without pauses, with a radiant, high-pitch of confidence in her voice, till she realized I wasn't saying a word, not even humming in assent.

"Are you still there?", she asked

"Yes...", I said, feeling the fear gush from my lower stomach to my stern

"Are you ok?"

"I got out of the hospital this morning, someone tried to kill us", I said quietly

"What?!", Christine almost yelled

I told her what happened, and as I described the events, stating them out loud, I felt the fear flow out of me a bit at a time. Suddenly it all seemed so theatrical and unreal, as if it wasn't happening to me but to

a character I had read about and in which I was identifying myself during a dream or a daytime phantasy. And tomorrow I was flying out to Milan.

"Tomorrow I am flying to Milan", I heard myself say, as if watching myself from the outside

Another stupefied reaction, almost shouted from the other end of the line, and again my explanation, the feeling of a surreal setting dwelling within me, the walls of my home oddly transforming, becoming known and unknown at once, as I ran my eyes across the room.

Then I saw Jack stand at the bathroom's door, towel wrapped around his waist, eyebrows arched, an ironic smile twisting his lips. I turned my palms upwards to mean "not my fault if she's asking", and he smiled again, shaking his head.

"Ok Christine, I have to finish packing now....I'll call you when I am back", I said, brought back to reality by Jack's skeptically amused expression

"Why were you laughing?", I said after I hang up

"Laughing?", he asked, laughter cracking the simulated expression of innocent perplexity

"Well, you looked funny, as if you were acting in a Hitchcock movie or something", he admitted after a pause

"But that's how I felt in a way...Christine told me she is sure that there is something going on between the cross cancer institute and the NY cancer institute, and the police is investigating. I wonder if Mariam Avery is involved but didn't say..."

"What about dinner and a good night sleep before tomorrow?", Jack said instead of following up on my thoughts

"Ehm uhm", I nodded, and let Jack guide me through this strange night

Chapter 60

The next day we took off for Milan and twenty hours later we poked the clouds and began circling over the city, dense with brick-tiled roofs, churches, streets arranged in circular patterns, life swarming in the moist heat of this northern Italian morning, and finally we landed at Malpensa airport. I was nauseous with stuffy air in my lungs and bitter corporate airline coffee in my stomach, legs crumpled, head spinning from the broken sleep and yet electrified, waves of happiness and curiosity and excitement pulsing inside me, moving me on in spite of the physical exhaustion. Smell of coffee, richly fragrant, smell of croissants, people with stronger fragrances and more elegant outfits than what I was used to, words exchanged, rounded, intense and flirtatious or spicy with irritation, always lacking the cool quality of the English language.

It was almost noon by the time we passed through the customs and picked up our luggage. We figured there was a train shuttle that could bring us straight to the center of the city, but then we thought we would struggle to find our way to the hotel, with the luggage in our way and tired as we were. There was a line of white taxis at the exit, and we picked one, a European car I had never seen before in the States. It looked good, and I thought that I would have liked to drive one of the same make, but black.

“Where are you going?”, asked the taxi driver, his thick Italian accent marking the English words

We handed him the printout of where the hotel was, he had a brief look, handed it back to us and nodded.

We drove in silence for a while, crossing the outskirts of the towns, still far from the city, asphalt and fields around us. I looked at the cars passing us by, most of them unknown to me, most of them small.

“Do you know a good place to have lunch?”, I asked after a while

“Your hotel is in the center. There are many restaurants, you can pick”, he said accompanying the explanation with a contained gest, before returning his hand on the steering wheel.

I nodded, and we were silent again. I would have imagined Italians to be more talkative, but was I being stereotypical? Although my ancestors had been Italian I was American down to the bone, but with high expectations and earnest excitement to know about my forgotten heritage. I imagined to be very much Italian, the way second or third generation kids of Italian immigrants do, with a national pride that Italians born and raised in Italy don’t have.

After driving for a stretch of time the city buildings began to appear, tall modern constructions of grey concrete, paper ads glued on large boards displaying food, bikinis, tropical beaches, invitations to eat, buy, pack up and go written with words I could guess from the pictures rather than understand, and tunnels lit with orange lights, graffiti, graffiti everywhere, scribbled in impossible spots where I would have bet nobody could get, bold and rudely outspoken in the summer air of the city, thick with heat and humidity.

Then the streets got smaller, the buildings older and not as tall, concrete giants giving way to brick facades, the plaster crackled here and there painted with light pink or yellow or faded white, and I began seeing shops, many of them, bread shops, coffee shops and tiny grocery shops where old ladies walked in and out, very decent in their pressed shirts and skirts, carrying bags or dragging shopping carts, moms with their kids, ice-creams melting in their hands, scooters zig-zagging around the streets, adults driving, teenagers driving with their sweethearts clinging onto them on the passenger seat.

“I like this!”, I exclaimed, taking it all in from the window

Jack smiled tiredly and squeezed my hand.

“We are not far from your hotel”, the taxi driver said looking at me through the mirror

I nodded, grinning, and began looking out the window again.

As we drove the atmosphere transitioned gradually from rustically urban to classy, and five minutes later we were surrounded by marble facades and precious small shops, the wheels of our taxi jerking on the broad stones blocks of the paving, cut by trails on which fashionably démodé orange streetcars made their way, slowly but surely.

“Look!”, I told Jack, pointing at a building with flowery balconies, bright in its antiquity against the hot blueness of the sky.

“This is Via Manzoni, we are very close to your hotel”, the taxi driver informed us

"I love this area!", I exclaimed

"Can we go for a walk later?", I asked Jack, infantine notes resounding in the joyful eagerness of my voice

"Sure", said Jack, fascinated himself now in spite of the tiredness, my excitement pouring into him as the beauty of the city unravelled at each turn of our cab.

Few moments later the taxi driver stopped in front of our hotel. It looked smaller than on the picture posted on the booking site, and I thought it was better that way. We paid for the ride, and I was stunned at how expensive our trip had been, but was too happy and strained from travelling to worry about it.

There was a very Italian looking man standing under a cantilever roof to greet new hosts. He nodded slightly as he saw us and opened the door, as detached as the cab driver had been. But then we found a plump girl at the reception, who spoke pushing back her curly hair, smiling and gesturing generously as she spoke.

"I can give you a map later if you want, I can tell you which places to go see", she told us as she handed us a key chained to a massive metal key holder, which must have weighted half a pound.

Our room had the touch of stuffiness of old things, but the overlapping smells of linen and detergents conferred a cheerfully airy flavour to the place once we opened the window, letting the sounds of the streets spill in and animate the stillness of the room.

We arranged our clothing in the closets, showered hastily and out we went again, Jack wanting food, and me wanting the thrill of the novelty from the ancient city of my ancestors. We had about four hours before we would meet Dr. Mori about the polymer business, which at that moment seemed further than an ocean and a day away from me.

Chapter 61

We jumped on one of the orange streetcars I had noticed while riding in the cab to the hotel, which brought us close to the square dominated by the Duomo – the Dome, the symbol of the city as the girl at the hotel told us, is an ornate cathedral, with a foamy façade protruding towards the sky, its white pinnacles tending themselves towards white clouds with playful lightness.

We walked around till we found a pizzeria in a side street, close to Duomo's square and yet concealed, strangely quiet compared to the porticos running along the streets irradiating from the square, where flows of people slowly dragged from one fashion shop to the next, going in and out, bags, ice-creams and granitas in their hands, indolent in the intensity of the summer heat.

We ate our pizzas voraciously, not so much because we were hungry, but because the crust was thin and the mozzarella had a soft creamy taste and the tomato sauce was mouth-watering, and the whole restaurant had a marvellous smell of stone-oven baked pizzas that made one long for food. It was only when we had swiped our dishes clean that we realized we had too much and too fast, and when we stepped outside on a full belly the hot day seemed hotter and the tiredness from the trip plunged in heavily, making us dizzy with drowsiness. We had a coffee, creamy and fragrant, served by a barrister in a white uniform, a tie around his neck.

“Prego”, he said, placing two small chocolates on the dishes holding our small porcelain espresso cups.

The price was 80 eurocents per coffee, something like a dollar, and I couldn’t believe it. La dolce vita...life was good here, or at least so it seemed to my American tourist eyes.

The hours flowed mellifluously as we unhurriedly lingered in the streets around Duomo’s square, and 4 pm came too early. I had plunged into a timeless dimension, and the realization we had to get on a streetcar again to reach Mori’s research institute impinged on me like needle inexplicably hidden in the soft folds of clean bed linens.

“But really? Is it 4 pm already?”, I asked plaintively when Jack looked at his watch and said it was time for us to get going

“If you ask me I have no drive to meet Mori now, but what can we do?”, said Jack pinching my cheek the way adults do with kids

And so we headed to the streetcar, hands laced, romantically heading to discuss the potentially lethal effects of a compound I synthesized as a game, gambling with chemistry in the mint-whiteness of certified corporate labs.

Chapter 62

Mori’s office was a spacious room with two large windows, but dimmed by old metal blinds of the economical type. There was a controlled disorder in the room, with piles of papers and books stacked according to some logic, and yet misaligned. And there were objects of all sorts sprawled on the grey metal cabinets and the shelves, some models of the human body, some small clay sculptures and a toy, a fabric multi-coloured turtle. And there were pictures on the wall, photos of Mori with a woman, Mori holding a kid by hand, Mori in his bathing suit, grinning with a drink in his hand. There were posters and prints of modern paintings, and childish drawings, probably sketched by the kid in the picture, his child.

“I love your office”, I said, after landscaping the room, bluntly and thoroughly, without trying to conceal my curiosity in any way

Mori laid his gaze on me, dark and sharp through the rounded black-rimmed spectacles, and smiled. The smile was balanced, detached and enigmatic almost, its coolness an oxymoron with the charcoal intensity of his eyes. His dark-brown hair fell softly on his squared face, above the jaw, framing the slightly bloated cheeks.

“Thank you”, he said after a moment

“Thank *you* for having me here. I haven’t told you about the last episodes, but the situation has slipped out of my hands”

He waited for me to continue, without changing expression, with the same burning attentive gaze in his eyes. I told him about the “accident”, and the hospital and all the rest, wondering if I was pushing myself too far and yet unable to stop at this point.

When I finished my account he said, “If you bring your sample tomorrow we can test it on some cells. After we obtain some preliminary results we can run further tests on some human organs. We are able to reproduce organs starting off from human cells, it’s still a pilot study but it is promising. Testing

substances on animals has limited scientific validity when you think about the differences between species. From a scientific standpoint, extrapolating information from animals to humans is a meaningless exercise”

Curt sentences and confidence, a life ethics implied seamlessly in Mori’s scientific choices, stated with a calm that left no room for discussion. I felt small and safe in front of this man, and I loved him for letting me uncoil, for showing me that I got it all wrong but that I could still have some faith in this world.

Chapter 63

“Mori looks like a good man”, I said as we walked away from the Molecular Research center

“He does, but you should have some reserves the first time you meet someone. You told the guy everything about what happened, and you don’t really know who he is. I would have kept it simple, science-related, but after all it doesn’t matter”, Jack replied with a shrug

“Yeah...”

“What about trying this area for dinner?”, Jack said producing the map we got from the hotel, and pointing at an area around which the girl at the front desk had hastily sketched a circle, shooting an arrow pointing to its name scribbled in capital letters “Navigli”.

“Navigli are canals, you can have a good lunch or dinner there!”, she had said with her simple, thickly accented English.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking!”, I said, a high pitch of excitement peaking midway through the sentence, making Jack laugh a hearty laugh

“But can we also go have an aperitif in the other place she told us about?”, I said

“Who told us to go where?”

“The girl at the hotel...she said Corso...corso...let me see”, I said, tugging the map from Jack’s hands to find the place

“Aha! Corso Como, here!”, I said, pointing at the street the name of which had eluded me

“All of this tonight? Aren’t you a bit tired?”

“Ehm...”, I said pouting, and then, “We don’t have to”, my pout breaking into a smile

“Let’s go to Corso Como”, Jack replied, shaking his head and leading me to the streetcar’s stop, pushing me by the elbow, sliding amused glances to the mischievously happy curiosity of my face

Chapter 64

Our streetcar left us close to Corso Garibaldi, from which, based on our map, we could reach Corso Como in a short while. Corso Garibaldi had a more selectively chic population compared to the areas immediately adjacent to Duomo’s square, and although vivid it had a touch of the quiet flavour typical of residential areas. I walked lightly, dancing my feet in playful moves every now and then, mesmerized by the colourful melody of the shops’ glasses, with their displays of elegantly exotic clothing, flowers, classy bicycles, cakes and cookies, and other objects, all of which, even ordinary ones, had an unordinary

taste to them. But above all, it was an ice-cream shop that attracted my attention. The bottom part of the glass was satin, with flowers decorated on it, while the top was transparent and I could see the lady dressing a cone for an eager kid, a smile on her face as she carefully placed a third scoop of chocolate on top of what looked like cream and pistachio.

The view of the kid's cone and of the tasty palette of ice-cream colours made my mouth water and I said, "Let's go in!", dragging Jack by the arm. And yet there was something disturbing about the ice-cream shop, although I couldn't pin it down.

Jack noticed the initial eagerness, and then the doubt alternating lights and shades on my expression, and looked at me curiously, "Are you sure you want it or are you simply set on taking it all in, no matter what?"

"I don't know...the ice-cream looks good, no?"

"Sure, let's go for it", Jack said, still observing me as we opened the door of the shop

We stepped in the shop just as the kid was walking out, lapping on his cone happily, eyes crossed by looking at it from a close distance. The place was cool and sweetly scented. The lady smiled and said, "Un attimo solo", raising her finger and walking away at the back. We figured she meant "One moment", and were glad we were gaining some more time to decide since there were about 20 tastes of ice-cream among which we could choose from. I noticed there was a copper bell at the counter, one of those you see at the hotels, and its presence made me anxious for reasons I couldn't yet define. I turned around, looking at the street, and caught a glance of a familiar face.

Jack followed my gaze, "Everything ok?", he asked and I shook my head no.

"What's wrong?"

"I think I saw the cleaning lady...", I replied faintly, almost in a whisper

"Where?"

"Out there...", I said, trying to spot her, but she was gone already, so fast I was no longer sure about how much of what I had seen was real and how much of it was imagined

"You mean the camouflaged cleaning lady who tried to shoot you?", Jack frowned, and I nodded

I looked at the copper bell again and was about to ring it, when the lady came out, smiling

"Avete scelto?", she asked, standing at the counter with an ice-cream scoop in her hand

I gave her a look that must have appeared blank, and which she mistook for a perplexed reaction to her question

"Ah, you are American?", she said with the thickest accent, half as a question half as a statement, intrigued by the novelty of two foreigners standing in her shop

I nodded, pointing at two tastes, randomly, resisting the urge to run out of there as fast as I could. And it was then I remembered: the dream. The ice-cream shop, the satin glass, the flowers on the glass, the copper bell and the danger. Mori telling us to run. Jack there with me, running with me, the two of us

lifted in the air. And then the light, Jack's caring face close to mine. When my thoughts returned to the shop Jack had a cone in his hand, and had just finished paying.

I wrapped my arm around his, dragging him to the door hastily, and heard myself say, "We have to run"

"Arrivederci!", said the ice-cream lady on our back, with a loud cheerful tone, waving goodbye as we were halfway out the door

"Bye", Jack said for me, as I dragged him out

"Iris, are you sure of what you saw?"

I shook my head no, and repeated, "We have to run", the urge of my faint voice resounding in my panicking abdomen, in the beat of my heart and the softness in my arms, in my dizziness. The street blurred, its view flickered in patchy spots of black, intense light, black, intense light and black again, its darkness expanding in my view, large, larger and then complete.

Chapter 65

"Iris...Iris", I heard Jack say from a distance

"Iris", I heard again, more distinctly this time, as Jack's face appeared in a nebula of patchy dots of light and darkness

"Are you ok?", he asked again, worriedly, his features clear now

"Yes", I said and smiled, feeling strangely comfortable lying on the asphalt, my head resting on Jack's hands, my head and body light

"We'll go back to the hotel now", he said

"No..."

"What do you mean, no? Of course we are going back"

"I'd still like to walk to Corso Como, have something to eat there..."

"What? But you just got terribly scared and passed out, why do you want to keep walking around?"

I felt like I had been living on the edge from a while now, losing control over everything, including my life. Just few days earlier I could have died and now each moment seemed like a bonus, intense and all but granted. I feared for my life and felt fearless at the same time, I wanted to see through what was happening and take it all in, let the lymph of these places penetrate me, not letting go a single moment I could have with Jack. Because, after all, no matter how careful I was, these moments could be taken from me anytime.

"Because Corso Como is going to be a great spot, because we need food and because going to the hotel won't make us any safer", I said

Jack pulled me up and said, "I've asked you already, but how sure are you that the woman you saw was the one who caused the accident?"

Now I didn't feel sure at all. I told Jack about the dreams at the hospital.

"It felt like a deja-vu and the suggestion of the atmosphere might have played strange tricks on my mind", I said, trying to sound as reassuring as I could

"Ehm...", Jack grumbled unconvinced but yielding nonetheless, pulling me up and unfolding the map he had left on the ground beside me to check our way.

"We just have to keep heading straight", he said

We resumed our walk, leaving our melt cones behind. It was then I realized that few people had laid some perplexed gaze at me as I lay on the sidewalk, but nobody had stopped to ask if we needed a hand and the thought made me shiver. Would anyone help us if something worse than that happen?

And yet after few steps the liveliness of the place sank in me again, and I went back to my hunt for novelties displayed in the shops' windows, although not with the same carefree merriness that had animated me earlier.

Every now and then someone passed with a cigarette between their lips, leaving a trail of smoke behind, pleasantly aromatic in the summer notes of the dimming day.

Chapter 66

In Corso Como a bar attracted my attention, probably because I was beginning to feel very hungry and the smell of toasted bread and food diffused from it, tempting and heart filling. There were tables outside, arranged under red tents, and it seemed just natural to make yourself comfortable on a chair.

"What about having something to eat here?", I said, approaching the tables

Before Jack could answer a waiter approached up with a smile

"Accomodatevi dove volete", he said, with a broad gest indicating the tables and then pointing at a free one

I looked at Jack and he nodded yes, so we sat there and looked at the menu, of which we couldn't guess much because it was all in Italian. We spotted a couple next to us and looked at their dishes avidly.

"We want to have what they are having", we said when the waiter was back

He nodded and scribbled on his notebook, then asked, "Drinks?", accompanying the question with a gest of the thumb and the tipped head, although the question was clear enough

"Just water", I said

"With gas?", the waiter asked

"Oh, just tap water", I said and this seemed to confuse him a whole lot

He repeated the question and at last I said, "No gas", because I understood there was no way for me to communicate the idea of tap water to him

We waited for the food and ate our meals not talking much, not thinking much, simply having a break from ourselves and letting the outer world fluctuate through us, the heat dampening our worries. When the bill came it felt somewhat like those times when as a kid the car came to a stop after a long trip and I

had to get up, after laying on the backseat for hours, the lullaby of the breeze flowing through the window singing me to sleep.

“Should we go?”, Jack asked, looking himself unwilling to go anywhere

“I don’t want to but I suppose we must...”

“Are we walking back to the hotel?”

“There is one more thing I would like to see before that”, I said

Jack arched his brows

“Corso Como 10, remember the girl told us to go?”, I said

“We don’t have to see everything today, you know?”

“I know, but it’s so close and it’s not even 9, what are we going to at the hotel anyways?”

“Have a rest after more than 48 hours we haven’t had a decent one?”, Jack said, but then he shrugged and shook his head and I laughed at his half amused, half desolate surrender.

Chapter 67

We walked to number 10 of the corso – the street – up to a place which was not a bar, not a museum, not a shop, not a residential area but rather all of these at once. There was a court, which was somehow mysterious, although I couldn’t exactly tell why it felt so. There were plants, plenty of them, arranged in large vases and crawling along the old walls, and a ramp of stairs climbed up somewhere, while a bar stood half hidden behind a bamboo mobile wall and abstract sculptures.

“WOW, It was worth coming here!”, I exclaimed and Jack nodded, fascinated by the ambience, pausing his gaze on the stairs, following them up as far as his view could go

“What do you think is up there?”, he asked, moving towards them

“Let’s go and see!”, I exclaimed, humoring his renewed enthusiasm with my own hunger for discovery

We found a small room with some black and white photographs, framed in simple black metal. They represented faces and run-down places, beaches and bridges, and although the subjects were somewhat ordinary there was something disturbing and fascinating at once about the way they had been captured, or maybe it was just the atmosphere of the place that made them seem so. Dim light filtered through the thin glass of an old window and spread like fine sand on the wall, plastered unevenly and with sparse cracks creeping along it.

I went to the window and looked at the court from above. An elegant girl with high pumps and a pencil black dress walked out of the bar, swaying her hips and leaning on a guy’s arm, laughing languidly and tipping her head so that her curly locks fell sensuously backwards. Against the flirtatious flair of the girl’s curls lay the façades of the buildings surrounding the court, blossoming with flowers and flourishing with plants, which leaned from the banisters of small balconies like a kid’s unruly hair.

“Let’s explore what else is here!”, said Jack, turning to me with an excited light in his eyes

There was a bookshop around the corner of the hallway but it was closed, so we moved on till we found a terrace with a glass gazebo, under which sat a table with a mosaic top, crazy with multi-coloured patterns, harmonic in their chaotic essence. And there were statues, futuristic monsters and exotic species somewhat reminiscent of Gaudi's art. I walked around, touching the objects, inhaling the smells twirling from the bar in the dusky warmth of the evening, listening to the voices and the giggles dancing at a distance, embracing the place with my eyes, all my senses soaked with what we were experiencing.

Jack had sat at the table, laying back on the chair, a tired and satisfied expression on his face. I sat too, and ran my finger along the smooth mosaic fragments composing the table's surface. Jack's smiling eyes had just met mine when I heard a male voice at my back.

"Hello Iris, I have been looking forward to meeting you", the voice said

Chapter 68

A chill ran through my spine. I turned around and saw a small man, bold, skinny and with unpretentious clothing. Pants held up high on his waist with a belt buckled to the last hole, a checkerboard button up.

I found myself relaxing, perhaps out of exhaustion, because I had been so tense in the last while that my worn fibers could not be tensed anymore, or perhaps because it was impossible to conceive that a man like this could be dangerous.

"Why are you looking for me?", I asked calmly

"I am here to warn you against making a move that could harm you and others", the man replied in a monotone voice

"What are you referring to?"

"I suggest that we discuss this in a more private place", he said calmly

"There's nobody except us here", said Jack, who had been silent up to that moment

The stranger looked at him, turning his head slightly but abruptly, a hint of displeasure crossing his face, rapidly dominated

"We should not be seen talking together", he insisted

"By whom?", I asked

"By the person disguised as a cleaning lady, for instance"

So it was true, I had not been hallucinating after all

"Is she in this city now?", I asked, although I knew the answer

"Yes", he said, marking the answer slowly

At once I felt faint and impotent, tired of fighting and running and trying to understand

"Who is she? What does she want of me?"

"There is information I cannot give you. For your own protection and mine"

“Why should I trust you if you don’t give me any detail?”, I replied, abruptly, almost angrily

“I will give you as many details as I can safely provide, but not here”

“Where do you want to go?”, I asked, giving in

“The only places we can accept to go to with you are public places, so we might as well stay where we are”, interrupted Jack

The man didn’t turn this time, and replied, looking at me instead, “I want to go to a very public place, where we can be hidden by the crowd”

I nodded and asked, “Where?”

“There’s a dance club not too far from here”, he said, reaching towards the map that we had laid on the table and pointing at a spot. “Walk in front of me, I will follow and make sure nobody else is doing the same. Do not turn as you walk. If there is anybody else I will accelerate my pace, pass you and take a side street. If this happens you will know something is wrong”

“And what should we do in that case?”, I said, feeling my heart rush

“Nothing, just keep walking as if you haven’t noticed anything and head back to your hotel. For now they just want to check your moves and lead you to the moves they want you to take. They will not harm you before they succeed”

I wondered which moves, but before I could ask the man said, “You can start going now”

“What is your name?”, I said, hesitating to leave the patio

“Call me Ronny”

I looked one last time at this stranger who had an insignificant appearance and called himself Ronny. Then I embraced the place with a circular gaze, wondering what situation I was driving myself and Jack into and if we would ever see this spot again. A wave of sadness rose within me, but before it could reach my eyes and make them go teary Jack reached for my hand and took it, his torso protectively touching my back.

“Let’s go”, he said, so I turned and walked my way back along the hallway we had crossed just moments earlier, when we were still tingling with a mirthful feeling of curiosity.

Chapter 69

We slid along the streets, furtively looking around to capture any suspicious presence, anxiously following the path Ronny had traced on the map for us to follow.

“Why are we going with this stranger in an unknown place?”, I said, half talking to myself

“At least the place is full of people”, Jack said

“What if we just run back to the hotel?”

“I don’t think there would be any use in doing this. The guy found us already, and he will catch up with us again”

I nodded, feeling like a pawn moved along a checkerboard by the hand of a ruthless player. The realization that, no matter what I did, I had almost no control over what was happening oddly relieved me.

When we reached the spot Ronny described it all seemed so unreal I could have been in a movie. Seen from the outside the nightclub had an underground feeling it to it, half-hidden as it was, with the neon lights on the charcoal coloured façade half lit-half blinking and the black paint peeling off it. And yet when I stepped inside the ambience was almost cozy, with the music kept at a reasonable volume and the vintage flavour of the crimson furniture. A waitress sat us at a table, and we plunged into the cushioned chair, distractedly leafing through the drink menu while scanning the room for Ronny.

Ten minutes elapsed and I was becoming impatient. Jack's face looked strained from the long day and I felt my own strength running low. I wondered if something had happened or if this was a sort of trap, but I was too tired to think, so I sipped my drink slowly, closing my eyes every now and then. And my eyes were closed when I heard the chair next to mine being moved, and when I opened them Ronny was there. We hadn't been standing so close before, and now I realized he had a faint smell of perspiration concealed by a man's fragrance, with pungent notes I did not like.

Jack nodded to acknowledge his presence, and I said, "I wasn't sure you'd come anymore"

"I had to be careful", he replied

"So what is it that you wanted to tell us?", asked Jack when the waitress came along with a kinky smile.

"Scotch and water, with no ice", said Ronny without looking at the menu. He had a light accent when speaking either English or Italian, and I wondered where he was from.

When the waitress was gone he paused, observing us for a moment, then said, "You should not go see Mori tomorrow"

"Why? And how do you know we'll be seeing Mori tomorrow?", I asked

"I have my ways to know things", Ronny replied calmly, and paused again

"So why are you telling us not to see Mori tomorrow?", I insisted

"You gave your trust away too soon in the past, haven't you?"

I didn't reply, but after a moment Ronny continued without waiting for my answer

"And what have you achieved?"

Another pause.

"You tell me since you have your ways to know things", I said, too worn out for self-control and hating this game of rhetorical questions

"You let your polymer fall in the hands of the wrong people, who are now using it in ways you cannot control", he concluded, with the same monotonous voice he had since he spoke the first sentence on the patio

"In which ways are they using it? And who is doing this? Who is the cleaning lady?", I asked, the adrenaline suddenly rushing through my veins and roughening my voice

"It is not safe for me to tell you the details, you are too shaken to be trusted"

"Mori can help me understand what is happening"

"Or maybe he can start using the polymer for his purposes. You cannot be sure. Right?"

I was at a loss and didn't know what to say anymore, when Jack spoke.

"What would Mori do with our polymer?"

"Use it for his purposes, as I said"

"Which are?", Jack urged him, calmly but relentlessly

"I cannot reveal information, but trust me, I am well informed"

"No doubt you are, but we aren't. So fill us in with what will happen if we go see Mori and neglect your good advises"

"I am not sure", Ronny said

Jack bugged his eyes, slightly tipping his head

"I thought you just said you are well informed", Jack replied ironically

"What do you mean you are not sure?", I asked, unable to decide if Ronny was menacing us with his calmest tone

"I mean that I am not able to predict now what will be the consequences of handing your polymer to Mori"

"You mean he can misuse it", I said

"For instance"

I felt he wouldn't go much further than that. I wanted to go back to the hotel, wash myself, sleep.

"Will you come after us if we give the polymer to Mori?", Jack asked

"I want to prevent you from doing it, rather than come after you after the damage is made"

"So you will sequester us before we speak to him again", I said

"I am not a criminal", Ronny said, looking at me for a long while. I held his gaze, and for a moment I felt he would be true to his words and would not harm us. He must have perceived the breach in my defenses because he said, "I am here to prevent the worst from happening. Ponder what has already happened and take the right decision"

I looked at him, thoughts racing painfully fast through my febrile mind. Then Ronny did something unexpected. He reached for my hand and said, while holding it, "We'll talk again, and this is not a menace. I will not hurt you".

Then he placed a bill under his glass and walked away.

Chapter 70

"What are we to do?", I asked, closing my eyes in exhaustion

Jack pulled out his wallet and placed a few bills under the glass, the same way Ronny had done.

"Let's go", he said, touching my arm

We found a streetcar stop not too far from the nightclub and rode it in silence, letting its monotonous rock appease us. I was about to fall asleep when I felt a jerk and I opened my eyes. The streetcar stopped. I looked up and saw a red traffic light. I turned around and Jack attempted a tired smile.

"What are we going to do?", I asked again

"Go to bed as soon as we get the chance", he replied, trying to add a touch of cheerful assurance to his words

"What about Mori? Should we see him tomorrow morning?"

"Why wouldn't we?", Jack said

"Because of what the guy told us..."

Jack shrugged

"Did you believe him?", I asked

"No"

"At moments I did..."

"Think about it. You contacted Mori first", Jack argued

"Yes, but he invited me here...", I said

"Sure he did. You asked for his help and he accepted to help. Why would you go trust a guy who popped up from nowhere, after following us for who knows how long and on behalf of whom", Jack insisted

"Yeah...I don't know what I was thinking"

Jack smiled again and pet my shoulder.

"We'll be fine", he said

I knew he had doubts about that just as much as I did. I smiled back though, trying to look reassured and reassuring.

Few minutes later we finally reached our stop, and it was good to be close to the hotel although getting up on my feet and walking again, even for a few more steps, was painful. I collected my strength. One step after the next, we got across the street, and past the hotel entrance and in the elevator, and in the hallway and finally in front of our room.

But the door was cracked open and a cone of light projected itself out of our room, into the hallway.

Chapter 71

Jack and I looked at each other.

Please not now, not again, I thought

"Let's go call the security", Jack said.

I hesitated, and Jack repeated, "Let's go".

"But...", I began, feeling that if the police got involved we would have to explain way too many things

Jack waited for a moment, but then he took me by the hand with a sense of urgency. He was about to drag me downstairs when suddenly we saw a man, dressed in hotel staff suit, walking towards us from the end of the hallway. I froze and I felt Jack's hand become tense and moist with cold sweat. The guy had the appearance of the average Joe who works in a hotel, and I could not explain the rush of fear that was taking us both other than with the fact that our senses were over-sensitized with the avalanche of events swamping us.

When the man was close he looked at us and said, "Is everything fine?".

It was probably a legitimate question, because we must have seemed oddly disturbed, and yet the idea that he had been following us flashed through my mind. We stared at him without answering, and he repeated the question.

"Our door has been opened", said Jack at last

The guy turned towards the door and pondered the fact for a moment.

"Did you just get here and found it like this?", he asked, and I nodded

He seemed hesitant to go in, and after waiting a moment asked us another question.

"Did you have any important things in there?"

I thought about the polymer samples. The first thought I had had is that whoever went in there was after us, but now all of a sudden it occurred to me that perhaps he or she was after the samples instead.

"Just our luggage...", I replied vaguely

"We'll call the security", interrupted Jack

The guy looked at us and after pondering a moment he conceded, "Yes. I think we should", but stood there without moving. There was something very odd about the scene, as if a movie was being played in slow motion.

"Come on Iris, let's go", said Jack, who after a moment of disorientation had reacquired his quick wit.

I was already starting to head away with Jack when the man stopped us.

"Maybe we can go in and have a look first", he said, starting to open the door.

And there, at the entrance, we saw the cleaning lady who had been following us lying on the floor, a red stain spread on her back. Had it not been for that stain, she could have been alive, lying there with her eyes closed.

Time froze and my thoughts froze. I felt nothing, as if I was under a massive dose of anesthesia. Then there were sirens coming from a distance, getting closer and closer, and finally they were there, right under our room. We heard conceited voices, and a moment later two police officers were walking towards us.

“Polizia”, they said, showing us their badges

One of the two police officers bent on the body and placed his fingers on the woman’s jugular veins. He kept them there for a moment, then stood up, shaking his head. He was a man of about 40, stocky and with large feet, which seemed to ground him down and keep him balanced no matter what. The other policeman was thinner, nervous, and his eyes were mobile and disquiet. The two officers walked around the room, looked around.

“Is anything missing?”, the thin policeman asked me

I shook my head and shrugged. “I don’t know”, I said

“We’ll need to ask few questions”, he said

“Sure”, replied Jack, who was keeping me close to him, a hand on my shoulder

“Did you know this woman?”

I shook my head no, trying to look credible

“We don’t live here”, said Jack, backing me up

The policeman nodded distractedly

We heard another siren. Two Red Cross nurses came, carrying a stretcher. One police officer pulled out a chalk and drew the profile of the body on the carpet. He took pictures from different angles. Then the nurses moved the body on the stretcher and made their way to the elevator.

“You have to vacate this room for a while”, the stocky officer said

I looked at him blankly, so he added, “But we’ll have the girl at the front desk give you another one”.

“Can you check if anything is missing?”, the thin policeman asked

I opened my luggage and saw it had been fumbled through. I felt around with my hands and looked under my clothing, unfolding them to make sure nothing passed unnoticed. So I was sure: the polymers were missing. I should have been shaken, but too much had happened and I was beyond the point of exhaustion.

I got up with effort and said, “Someone went through my stuff but I think they didn’t take anything”

“Do you have any idea about why someone would try to go through your belongings?”, the thin officer asked, and tired as I was I noticed that the way the guy phrased his sentences in English was more sophisticated than the average guy in Italy would phrase them

"I don't know..."

"And what about your belongings? Anything missing?", the policeman asked, addressing Jack

"Not really. They went through my clothing too, but everything is here", he said.

We had distributed the polymer vials between our two suitcases, in case one of them got lost. I wondered if for a very strange case the polymer vials in his luggage were still there, or if he was lying the same way I had.

The thin policeman landscaped the room with his eyes one more time.

"We will have to ask you few more questions. We will come find you here at the hotel", he said after a pause

"Ok", I said, wondering what we would do the next day, but too tired to ponder any possibility for too long

"We'll have the hotel staff get another room for you. You can gather your belongings now, but do not touch the door handles. Is everything you have in there?", he asked, pointing at our luggage

Before we answered he gave a quick look at his stocky colleague, who nodded and walked out the room. My gaze trailed behind his steps, my moves and thoughts slow and blurred.

"Yes, we just got here today. We didn't have the time to move things around...", I replied after a moment

"Good", he concluded

By the time we closed our luggage, the stocky policeman came back with a woman in hotel uniform at his side.

"I'll bring you to a new room. This way", she said, her plump hips raising and falling vigorously at every step.

"We will need to talk to you in the next days", the policemen with the nervous temperament reiterated.

Jack and I nodded yes, then turned away, dragging our suitcases behind.

Chapter 72

As soon as we lay on the bed we fell asleep and slept a dreamless sleep. When the alarm rang at 7 I snoozed it off, and closed my eyes with the delusional resolution to get up in no more than five minutes. Of course I feel asleep again.

"Hey Iris...hey"

"Ehm...", I moaned

"Come on, we have to get up", Jack insisted

I sat on the bed, still so tired it was as if the night hadn't happened at all.

"So are we going to see Mori?", I asked

"Of course", Jack said

"But we don't have the polymer anymore", I said with an odd sense of incredulity, as if I was trapped on the stage of a surrealist play

"We do", Jack said with a smile

"They didn't take them from your luggage?!", I exclaimed

"I placed the polymer that was in my luggage in the safe box with our passports", he smiled

"Really? Ah, you are so awesome, boy!", I said with transport, pressing my lips hard against his and smiling back, fully awake now.

But then I thought about the dead body the night before

"What if the police comes to ask questions?"

"We are allowed to go outside, they didn't tell us to wait in the room indefinitely"

"Do you think Ronny is the killer?"

"No", Jack replied without any hesitation

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because he was with us and we came straight to the hotel after he left. He couldn't have killed the cleaning lady or whoever she was, he would have not had the time"

"Yeah, this makes sense...but then who did it?"

"I don't know. But don't you find that the situation was very odd yesterday?"

"Yeah, there was a dead body lying on the floor"

"No, I mean, why was the guy who first met us in the hallway so hesitant to call the security guard? And who called the police anyways?"

"Maybe the hotel staff was alerted by odd noises and thought that something suspicious was happening in our room..."

"But when we asked for our room keys they let us go upstairs without warning us to stay away from our room until the situation was cleared. Why so?"

"Maybe some other guest called the police...", I suggested

"Sure, but then don't you think a guest would have called the hotel staff for assistance or at least to let them know that there was something wrong? Wouldn't this be the first thing you would do if you felt something was not quite right?"

"I suppose so, yes", I admitted

"And why did the police let us take our suitcases if they had been rummaged through? Don't you think they should have kept them to try and find traces and clues about the killer?"

"Yeah, you're right...but what do you think is happening then? Do you believe the police is involved in this in some way?"

"Apart from noticing that what is happening is strange, I don't understand a single bit about it. Anyways, what about heading to meet Mori and having some breakfast on the go?"

I nodded.

"Thank you for being here, Jack", I said looking at him

I would have crashed if he hadn't been there, that's certain

He took the tip of my nose between his fingers and tugged it playfully, shaking his head and smiling.

"Come on, let's get ready", he said.

Chapter 73

When we reached the institute we found Mori waiting for us at the entrance, chatting happily with the receptionist.

"So you're here, good morning!", he greeted us as soon he caught sight of us looking around, hesitant about where we should go, still in rough shape from the previous day and having been here only once

Mori noticed our strained faces and red-rimmed eyes, and studied us with a focused expression, his smile fading.

"You looked in better shape yesterday than you do today", he commented after a moment

I shrugged and raised my palms, attempting a smile

"The hotel wasn't that great?", he asked, starting to walk to the elevator

"Long story...", I replied

"I think you should know", said Jack to my surprise, because he didn't reveal facts unless it was necessary or he had complete faith in his interlocutor

"What should I know?", asked Mori, stopping

"It's best to talk about it in your office", Jack said

Mori nodded, and continued walking us to the elevator, his steps a bit faster now. There were other people waiting to go up, and when we stepped in the elevator we were tight. I stood there, my eyes fixed on the digits increasing on the display at each floor, impatient for the ride to end

I wasn't sure about how Mori would react, and I was worried that he might pull back, tell us he didn't want to get involved in a turbid saga with an unpredictable ending. But in the calming environment of his office Mori listened to Jack's account, his charcoal eyes attentive behind the black-rimmed spectacles, nodding every now and then, and I knew he wouldn't bail out even before he told us.

“Well, if so many people are after you it means that you’ve hit one something big. It means we should get started now and understand what the polymer can do to the body”, he said when Jack finished speaking

Then he got up and walked to the door.

“Let’s go”, he said, smiling with calm confidence and waiting for us to follow.

Chapter 74

The lab gave out a feeling somewhat different from that of our lab, it was equally white, equally aseptically clean, but the ceiling was lower and the sound of the Italian words spoken between the researchers made the whole setting seem somewhat more relaxed.

Mori nodded to few people, “Buon giorno, come va?”, he said, placing a hand on their shoulder, “Bene, bene...”, they nodded back.

“So, what we should do is test if the polymer slows down the functioning of essential organs, or interferes with it, or stops it altogether”, Mori said

“How will we do this?”, I asked

“Let me show you something”, he said, and walked to a machine that looked somewhat like an autoclave but not quite.

There were tubes coming out of it and going to what resembled a dialysis machine. And there was another bulky device hooked up to it that, with a screen showing what looked like an electrocardiogram.

“We have a heart in here, and it’s alive”, he told us, and then paused, observing our reactions

I wondered how the heart was kept alive, looked at Jack, and he seemed pensive and intrigued too

“So do you pump blood into it to keep it alive?”, Jack asked, his words echoing my thoughts

“We do, and continuously purify the blood that flows through it. But circulating blood in it is not enough to keep it alive. We also keep it pulsing by providing electric stimuli”, he said, pulling up a lever and opening the lid of the machine for us to see.

The heart was contracting, expanding, contracting and the tubes connected to it were pulsing with blood. The scene was fascinating and revolting at the same time. What I was seeing seemed unbelievable, more like a sci-fi movie than reality.

Mori closed the lid and locked it down tight, then looked at us and grinned with pride for the shortest moment, before recomposing his features in a unassuming, calm expression

“There’s only another place in the world where they have achieved similar results. We also recreated a part of the intestinal tract, and we are working on developing lungs now”, he explained

I nodded, stunned by what I was seeing and hearing. Mori had given us an anticipation of this the first time we had met him in the office, but I had not expected anything of the sort

"This is unbelievable, it makes the biological research I was doing seem a kid's game", said Jack

I looked at him surprised, and realized I he had never told me the details of what he had been studying. It was strange how I knew who Jack was, how I felt the core of him, without knowing any or very few details about his past.

"But of course this is the fruit of a joint effort", Mori replied, waving off the compliment

"Sure, but it's great", I insisted

"So here's my plan", said Mori, diverting the topic, "I think we can continuously inject small amounts of the polymer in the blood that goes to the heart for half an hour time period. After that we'll stop, and the machine will gradually remove the polymer from the blood much the same way kidneys would. Some of the polymer may be retained from the heart's tissue though, and have an effect on the way it pulsates. We'll provide the same electric stimuli, and see if the heart's reaction to them varies after it is "contaminated" with the polymer", he said

Jack and I nodded, "Thank you, this is really much beyond what I could have ever done or expected to do", I said, meaning it

"And if we rule out effects on the heart we will move on to analyzing if it acts on the intestinal tract. Let's get started", Mori said, suddenly pacing fast and gathering what was necessary for the test on a bench close to the machine, while Jack and I stood there waiting.

I was tired, but the scientific excitement mingled with the anxiousness of what we would see had swept away the worries of being hunted down by people who were able and willing to kill.

Mori diluted down the polymer from the stock solution, and began injecting it in the blood from a port in the tubing.

"I'll inject 10 microliters every minute", he said, holding a stopwatch in one hand and a gastight syringe in the other.

Our eyes were magnetized by the electrocardiogram, punctuated by a blipping sound. First shot. Blip, blip, blip. Regular sound, slower than the beat of my own heart. Second, third, fourth shot, and the blip was unchanged, the electrocardiogram too. My jaw was locked down painfully tight. Fifth shot. The slightest change in the electrocardiogram, just one peak slipping off its perfect position, just a tiny shift in the regular blipping sound. Sixth shot, and there was another shift.

"Something is happening here", Mori said

"I know...", I replied faintly

Seventh shot. The blipping sound got fast, slow, fast again, the peaks of the electrocardiogram were far from regular now.

Eighth shot, my heart beating fast, the artificial heart running wild, fading off, racing crazily again like a dying animal in its last struggle.

"Oh my God...", I said in a whisper

I caught a glimpse of Jack, his expression was tense too, his tired eyes bugged and he seemed pale, although it could have been the light.

"What have I done", I said, placing my hands on my face

"You've produced something you never meant to circulate, and that someone else did probably out of greed", Mori said, but I shook my head no.

"No...I did it. I...", I whispered

I felt crashed, had I killed someone? Or were the deaths in the hospital unrelated to the polymer? I tried to ponder the possibility but couldn't believe it.

"Anyways, let's stop here and let's see if the heart will recover if we stop injecting the polymer", Mori said, "I have other tests in mind but you are too shaken now. Why don't we take a break?"

I nodded yes.

Chapter 75

"Do you mind if I use your computer for a moment to drop a line to my colleagues about what we just saw?", I asked as the door of the lab closed behind us

"Sure, and I'll treat you a nice coffee after that", Mori said, tapping my shoulder

I reckoned I must have looked like a wreck, I attempted a smile but all I could produce was a grimace

"Everything will be fine at last", he tried to reassure me

"Thank you, we really appreciate all you're doing", Jack said for me.

He was walking behind us and hadn't spoken in a while

Mori stopped and turned around.

"I myself want to know what happens if a polymer like the one Iris produced can affect the human body, and I also want to know why. This can help me in my own research. There is no need to thank me"

"But if the heart doesn't recover its functionality it will become useless for your own research...how long does it take you to produce a new one?", Jack asked

"About three months if everything works well", Mori told us

"And so now your own projects might be slowed down...", I said, realizing this for the first time, worried as I had been by the last facts up to this moment to think of it earlier

"Not really. We actually have other two hearts I haven't showed you", Mori reassured us

"You do?", asked Jack, and he was astonished

"Yes, we do", Mori replied quietly

We had reached Mori's office at that point, and he let me in.

“Take your time, I’ll go chat with the people in the lab for a moment”, he told me

I thanked him, let him log in the computer and sat on his chair, which was plush just to the right point, and large. In spite of everything, I felt comfortable sitting there.

Jack sat on the other side of the desk, looking out of the window.

I hadn’t been reading my emails since we had gotten to Milan, and the list of unread messages had reached a disturbingly high number. I browsed through them rapidly and stopped on one from Brad.

“Brad emailed me, I wonder what he says...”, I said out loud.

There was no subject on the email, which was odd because Brad had a sort of compulsive precision for things like this

Iris, write back to tell me you are fine as soon as you read me. McMurrich died. She has been run over by the car during the night, whoever did it ran away. It does not seem like an accident, Mariam Avery came here this morning to tell me. She could not reach you on your cell, call her when you can. Will they kill us all?

B.

I cupped my hands over my face and stood still for a moment, taking in the blow.

“What?”, Jack asked, but I couldn’t get myself to speak, so he walked up to my side and bent to read the email for himself. He craned his neck, re-reading the lines.

When Mori got back to the office he found us that way, me with my face still half hidden between the palms of my hands, and Jack reading the email, his face practically glued to the screen. He stood at the door for a moment, and when we finally looked at him he asked, “What else happened?”.

I read him the email to him.

He pulled up the receiver of the phone, handed it to me and said, “Phone the detective you’ve been speaking with”

“But she must be sleeping now”, I objected to the unnerving “blip...blip...blip” sound waiting for me to punch in the phone number.

“That’s no matter, call nonetheless”, Mori said firmly and so I did, unable to think too much in depth at that moment

Avery picked up the phone almost immediately, and from the tone of her voice I felt she had been only half sleeping, likely she had been trying to but was tossing around in bed.

“Hello Iris, I have been trying to contact you, it’s good you called”, she said

“Brad emailed me and told me...”

“He did”, she said, the question sounding like a statement

“Things have happened here too...”, I began, and told her about how I felt the cleaning lady had been following us, about Ronny and the dead body at the hotel, about the fact that there seemed to be

something odd about how the matter was handled. And at last I described what we had just seen in the lab.

"You should have called me earlier", she said, her voice tired

"All this has happened in the last 24 hours, not even", I told her, realizing the fact in the moment I phrased it

"I will try to find out what happened down there. But you should fly back as soon as you can"

"I cannot. Why?", I said panicking before I could understand the reason for my huge psychological reaction to the perspective of flying off back to the states in such a great rush

"Because I want to make sure you stay alive but I do not have the power to give you any protection if you are in Italy. And it seems like some of your friends managed to follow you there"

I felt nauseous. I looked at Jack and said, placing a hand over the receiver, "Mariam Avery says we should fly back as soon as possible because that's the only way she can give us protection"

Jack nodded

"Ok, I will see when we can get back", I told Avery

"Let me know the details when you know them, I will find you at the airport when you land"

"Ok...", I replied, knowing I should thank the detective but somehow hating her for what she had just told me to do

Mori was standing back against the door, leaning against it with his hands on the back.

"So you must fly out soon", he said

I turned my palms up, making a vague gest of impotence with my hands.

"I don't know anything anymore", I told him, feeling I was about to have a nerve crisis

"You fly back home and make sure you're safe, and I can run the other tests for you", Mori told me, and smiled

"Why are you so nice with me?", I asked, tilting my head slightly, my tone too warm for the time we had known each other

"Because I see the circumstances", he replied, his hand tracing an semicircle around the word "circumstances"

"Because I understand how stressed you are", he continued.

"Well, thank you", I said

"So, I suppose you can call the airlines to see when you can get back. At least we'll know right away how much time we have and we make a plan", Mori stated calmly

I was surprised at the way he was guiding me, and pleased because I was too shaken to take decisions for myself. Jack too seemed somewhat plunged in a stunned state, although he still retained his composure.

After holding and speaking with a representative from the airline and holding again I managed to change our departure date to the next morning, for an additional fee of 300\$ per person. I wasn't keeping track of the expenses piling up on my credit card and wondered how much money I would have to pay the next month to cover up for the mess that was happening. Good thing the insurance had taken care of most of my time at the hospital.

"So you still have an afternoon here", Mori said once I hang up

"What other tests do you have in mind?", Jack asked

"The first thing I have in mind is the coffee we had planned before Iris opened her mailbox. I'll tell you what other experiments I believe are worth trying over the breakfast I still haven't had this morning"

"Fair enough", Jack said, finally smiling

I smiled too now, and we headed to a bar a block away from the research center, walking the street already warm and buzzing with urban life.

Chapter 76

We sat at a table outside, with the aroma of coffee and sweets flowing in fragrant whiffs from the bar, and waited for our order. Jack and I already had breakfast, but the smell of coffee was so appealing we ordered cappuccinos anyways. Mori had a large mug of latte and two cream filled pastries, which he began eating voluptuously, and yet elegantly.

After he finished the first pastry he looked around contently, then smiled at me and said, "You shouldn't let the events get you down"

"Oh I don't...", I replied without meaning it

"You must remember that what is happening is not your fault. You are an ethic scientist"

"Not at all", I said, and this time I meant it

"Why do you say so?"

"Because I never thought about any consequence of what I was doing until the shit hit the fan. Excuse the language"

Mori smiled again, and looked at the street

"You see, we are all doing what we do because we enjoy it, not because we want to save humanity. The point is not to damage anyone in the process, and you didn't. You never intended your polymer to be released"

I sighed and shrugged.

"I never thought the polymer would kill people, but I intrinsically accepted the fact that it could do people some harm. The same way candy colouring, or hydrogenated fats do, just to mention few items among a long list of those that are around *regardless* of their effects on health"

Mori nodded

"The whole point is to learn from your experiences. You got it wrong, that's fine. So where do you go from there?", Jack said, and I started because I we never spoke about this before

Where would I go from there? I wondered at times, and had no answers

But before I could answer I saw Jack's expression darken, so I turned to the point where he was looking and I saw it too. A car passing by and a woman on the passenger's seat, her face looking like the face of the cleaning lady. Her hair was blond rather than dark, and yet the features were unmistakably hers

"It cannot be true", I whispered

"But you think the face was hers...and I do too", Jack replied

I frowned in silence, and looked back to the point where I had looked before, staring blankly at the flow of cars running by

"What is happening?", Mori asked

"Perhaps the lady who had been following us is still in business", Jack replied

"What do you mean?"

"That maybe she wasn't dead after all", I said

"She faked it to make you believe the danger was gone so that you would lower your guard?", he asked

"Something like that...maybe. I don't know", I said, shaking my head

"Ok, let's go", said Mori getting up, throwing a quick glance at the pastry still on the table before heading back to the clinic

We walked quickly, Jack and I throwing anxious glances around, wondering what would happen next. I felt sure that the people she was working for were involved in McMurrich's murder, and that I was the next target. I didn't even know if we would make it back home. A wave of sadness surged within me, and I tried to breath in the smells, take in the feeling of these streets. Would I be alive the next day? Would Mori be a target too? His pace was fast, but when we finally reached the entrance of the research building and stepped in I saw his expression was alert but calm.

"I would call your detective lady in the States again and tell her about this", he suggested

"Yeah...", I agreed

When we got to Mori's office and I punched in her number she picked the phone right away, and this time her voice was the voice of someone who was fully awake. I told her who we just saw.

"That's right", she said

"That's right?", I asked

"I made a few phone calls after you phoned me, and there didn't seem to be any shooting at your hotel. It was a bluff", she said.

Just as we thought, I told myself.

"So the lady is still around. Will we be the next target?", I asked, although I knew she couldn't answer.

She didn't, and instead asked me if I had fixed the time of the flight back

"I'll be at the airport when you get there, if anything comes up make sure you call me", she said

I said I would, and hang up.

"The lady is still around", I repeated, looking at Jack and Mori

"So what is the plan for the day?", Jack asked, as if hadn't heard my statement

"We go back to the lab and continue our work", Mori replied on behalf

And we did, working until late in the evening. One test after the other we saw how the polymer altered the normal functioning of the cells and the organs. And one test after the other we kept working, strangely galvanized by the fact that we were seeing what we expected, although what we expected was terrible.

At 9 p.m. we were still in the lab, exhausted and starving, and at that point sure of what the polymer could do to people.

"What about calling it a day and going for dinner?", Mori proposed

"Sounds like a plan", Jack agreed

I didn't say anything. I was numb and could have kept working all night. My mouth was dry and I felt raw, but I was in a self-destructive state of mind and all I wanted to do was work, work till I fell on the floor unconscious, with guilt as my blanket.

But then the food and the warmth of the air leaked into my mood as the evening flowed by, and by the time we finished our dinner I had regained some hope.

"What will we do next?", I asked

"In terms of our research?", Mori asked, and then, without waiting for my reply, "We'll have to try and find an antidote for this, right? As I told you this morning I will run some tests in the next days, and I will tell you what I find"

"I wish we could stay here...", I sighed

"I will keep you posted and you can come back once it is safe for you", he reassured me

"Don't worry", he added, leaning forward and pressing his hand on mine, smiling paternally

All of a sudden all I wanted to do was let myself lean on this man, taking in the reassuring calm exuding from him, and fall asleep till I all of this would feel like a nightmarish dream.

"Thank you", I said instead

“Don’t worry”, he repeated, “Let’s go get a good night sleep now”

He accompanied us to the streetcar stop and waved us goodbye, saying, “Have a good trip and be careful”

The next morning we were in the skies again, and about 15 hours later we landed on a hot Californian morning, worn out but still alive.

Chapter 77

Mariam Avery was waiting for us at the exit, as she had told us she would. She raised a hand seeing us, we raised it back, attempting a strained smile.

“Thanks for coming over to pick us up”, Jack said

“I’ll drive you home and give you some time to get yourself in shape and then I’ll have to ask you to come with me to the police station. I hope you aren’t too tired?”, she replied

“To the police station?”, I asked, perplexed

“We got a hold of a guy and I think you guys can help me understand if I hit on the right person”

“Who is he?”, I asked

“Let’s talk in the car”, she told me

While we walked to the parking lot I observed that her expression was alert, almost anxious. I kept throwing glances at her but either she didn’t notice or didn’t acknowledge my unspoken questions, as her attention was drawn to something else. We walked past some doors and into the elevators.

“I have the feeling a guy is following us”, she said at last, when the elevator door closed

“Which guy?”, I asked

“Small man, bold, innocent looking really”

“Ronny’s back”, I said, and began laughing

Jack and Avery looked at me with an astonished expression, as I kept laughing in an outburst of incontrollable hysteria.

“I want you to get a grip on yourself now and pay attention”, Avery told me with an authoritative tone, holding my arms firmly, her gaze straight into me.

She could have been trying to discipline her kid.

“When we get out of this elevator, I want you to carefully, and I said carefully, throw glances around. If the guy I think is following us is Ronny, make sure I understand it. Don’t take initiatives, just follow me. Clear?”, she said

I nodded

“And I want you to do the same”, she said, addressing Jack

“Sure”, he reassured her, looking calm

But when we got out of the elevator the parking lot seemed deserted, with only cars and hot air filling the space. We walked to Avery's car in silence. Avery had come here with a private vehicle, so that it looked like she was a friend or a relative who had come to pick us up from a trip.

"So whoever was following has disappeared", I said as Mariam drove out of the parking

She looked around into the rear mirrors and from the windows.

"Maybe. Or maybe he is going to catch up with us later", she replied

"But would he follow a policeman? That's pushing the risks", Jack wondered

"Sure it is, but he is following *you*, he needs to know when you and I meet to predict the next move"

I nodded

"And I will do the same with him", she continued

I looked at her questioningly

"We need to know who he works for", she explained, looking into the mirrors as she drove

"But do you think he knows you're a policeman?", I asked, and realized my question was naïve as soon as I formulated it

Instead of answering it Avery said, "Look at that car on the right lane, the grey Chevy. Look carefully"

"Yes", I said, but the reflection from the glass concealed the face of the driver

"I cannot see too well"

"I think it's him", Jack confirmed

"I can't see", I reiterated

Avery kept driving without changing her speed, and the Chevy did the same.

"There's an exit in few hundred meters, I am going to take it", said Avery

The memory of the car crash flashed back into my mind and I told myself, *this is it. I won't make it this time*. I felt almost a sense of relief giving up the fight. But then I saw the exit sign and Avery shifted to the right lane, and I was tense again. I was sitting on the back and couldn't see Jack's face, I wished I could. *Please not now, please tell me it will be fine*, I prayed in silence, although I am not a believer.

The Chevy was behind us now and the exit just few meters away. I turned around quickly and saw him. Ronny. At this point I was sure he knew I knew it was him. I stopped breathing. We took the exit and the Chevy kept going straight. All of a sudden I felt the urge to release my bowels. We followed the curved ramp leading us out of the highway and drove till we reached a residential area where low wooden houses lay in perfect stillness on the two sides of a reassuringly empty road.

"It was Ronny", I said then

Avery nodded, and kept driving without talking till we got to my home.

"I'll wait outside, I want to keep an eye on what happens around your house. Don't rush, but don't take too long either. We need to move fast, sorry", she said, speaking with tense curtness

We said all right, and went inside to give our abraded bodies and mind a clean-up before the next round.

Chapter 78

I had been away for only few days, but it felt like it had been centuries since I had last seen home. The dim light in the rooms, the old squeaky floor, the stillness of the air conferred to the place the atmosphere of a dream. Or so it seemed to me. Things were moving too fast and reality had lost meaning.

We were walking around the house in our underwear, unpacking quickly and getting ready for a shower when Jack stopped, and stood there looking at the room as if he was seeing it for the first time.

"What are you thinking?", I asked, stopping too

"When will this story ever end? Have you ever thought of going somewhere else and blowing all of this away?", Jack asked me

"Yes, yes...but they followed us all the way to Italy...", I begun

"Only because they knew what we were there for", he objected

"You think that if we moved to some desert island just to lie on the beach all day they will respect our good times?", I asked, laughing sadly

But Jack was serious.

"Not necessarily in an island, in any small place where we could make a living by making bread. Or something else, anything", he said

"I don't know Jack. It feels like I've entered a tunnel from which there is no way out. As if this will never end until I die"

I was about to say until we die, but didn't have the guts to.

"I am with you in the tunnel, and you bet I am going to find a way out. We'll walk out of the tunnel, trust me"

I looked at Jack's clear eyes and athletic body, and for a moment a rush of hopeful joy made me smile.

"Do you think this is really possible?", I asked

"Of course"

Of course. If Jack thought so, maybe it was possible after all?

"But now Avery is waiting downstairs", I said, reality tight on me again and yet a bit less anguishing
He shrugged.

"We've got to stop running around and take some time to think", he told me, but then added, ok let's go, and in less than 15 minutes we were in Avery's car, freshly washed and wearing clean clothing.

"So, who is the person we should identify?", I asked on our way to the police station

"Mark Gill. You met him before, right?"

"Yes. Did I tell you?", I asked, wondering for a moment if Avery had investigated on me too

"You told me", she confirmed

Right, I had, and now I remembered.

"So you think he is the one who sent people to follow us", I asked

"That's possible. I have strong reasons to believe he killed McMurrich"

"He killed McMurrich?!"

I was stunned

"Did McMurrich ever tell you about her relationship with Mark Gill?"

"No. McMurrich never told me anything personal"

Avery nodded, and was silent for a moment, formulating some thought hidden behind a frown I could see from the mirror.

"So what was their relationship?", I asked after a moment

"They were lovers"

"Lovers?", I asked.

So we had been right to think so when we saw them from the window of "The Greaser", driving together. And it made sense too, they looked like a good match. Both cold, both unfriendly and authoritative.

"So why do you think he killed her?", Jack asked

"His fingerprints were all over her place, which makes sense because they were lovers. But there were fresh traces of his tires in front of her house the night she died and her neighbours think they saw him

leave McMurrich's house late that day. We don't have any evidence that pins Gill down unequivocally, but my fifth sense tell me the man is involved"

I processed the information for a moment.

"How did he kill her?", I asked at last

"He ran her over with his car", Avery said

"But the man looked like the coolest control freak to me, otherwise, well, his relationship with McMurrich would be hard to conceive"

Jack was sitting on the front, he turned around for a moment and looked at me with an expression I couldn't fully decipher, perhaps reproachfully

Get over your hatred, she's dead, I imagined him think

"Maybe he lost control for once in his life. Maybe it wasn't planned", Avery said

I shrugged. I couldn't get myself to ponder the possibilities of life, I was tired and didn't really care anymore if McMurrich had died, and why. I didn't care to identify Mark Gill. I didn't even care about myself.

"So what will we be doing there?", I asked, leaning back

"You told me you brought the polymer to this guy for some analyses", Avery said

"I did", I confirmed, remembering just then that I had told Avery

"I want to understand if there is any link between the murder and the polymer", Avery said

She was speaking quietly now, almost to herself, as if she was trying to put some order in her thoughts while speaking to me

"A link between the murder and the polymer", I repeated, trying to make sense of the concept

"Was Gill trying to get to use the polymer for his own purposes and did he kill McMurrich because she had found out?", Avery asked herself out loud

"How can I know?", I replied, as if she were addressing me

I was starting to feel annoyed more than I was scared. I just wanted to go back home

"You cannot know. We are trying to find out. I will be asking Gill some questions and you will be listening to the answers behind a magic glass. I want you to listen to his answers and tell me your impressions", Avery explained

I looked out the window, closed my eyes, perhaps for few seconds, perhaps for longer. When I opened them I saw that Avery was looking at me from the mirror, waiting for my answer.

"Ok", I agreed

"It will take about an hour. I'll have someone drive you home when we finish. I'll also have patrols around your place overnight. You guys sleep in the same place?"

"We usually do", Jack replied for me

"If you do things will be easier for us, we'll have to patrol only one place at a time"

"Sure", Jack said

Avery slowed down her car, and pulled in the parking lot of the police station. She stopped the car, Jack opened the door but I didn't move.

"Come on Iris, help me sort this out and I'll help you go back to your old life", Avery said, turning around

"Come on", she repeated, and smiled

"Ok. But you know I'll never go back to my previous life. Anyways ok, ok...", I babbled, half talking to myself, half to her

"Good. Let's go", Avery said opening the door.

And this time I followed her.

Chapter 79

I had forgotten how the police station looked like, and there seemed to be a mismatch between the place I was seeing now and the waiting room where Jack and I had sat not too long ago. And how long ago was it anyways? Time had begun to lose meaning. Avery was already walking along the hallway, when I turned around and stopped a moment longer and stared at the room.

"Is everything all right?", Jack asked, reading the confusion on my expression

"Yeah...but doesn't it seem to you like this place is not the same as it was last time?"

"Not sure, I wasn't paying too much attention last time"

"Let's go guys", Avery urged us from the end of the hallway.

She was very tense, and although she managed to appear calm on the surface there were flashes in her expression, in her movements and tone of voice that betrayed her worries. I felt she knew or doubted something she hadn't told us, and I wondered what it was. Or was it something else? Was she thinking about her daughter at home, with a new nanny after her previous one had died in the lake? The lake and the girl. I had to shake my head to chase away the image.

"Come on guys", Avery repeated

I caught up with her and said, "You know Mariam, I think my polymer killed your daughter's babysitter and that it will probably kill me. And Jack. And who know whoever else. Everything is blurring in my mind, I don't know what to do anymore. I am sorry, and..."

"Iris", Avery said cutting off my words and gripping my arms, "Do not break down now, I need you. *What happened is not your fault and I will not let you die. Am I getting through to you?*"

She pronounced the last two sentences slowly, marking every syllable. I had never felt so close to Mariam Avery as I did then. It wasn't so much the exchange of words, but the eye contact, a subtle flow of feelings, and perhaps the physical contact. Her grip on my arm.

I nodded and she said, "good". She led Jack and me to a room with a glass on one side. We could see Mark Gill sitting alone in front of a long table.

"He can't see or hear what you say. You'll be able to hear Gill's answers to my questions, I want you to tell me what you think about them after I'm done with him, ok?"

"Ok", I agreed

Avery patted me on the shoulder and nodded at Jack, then left closing the door behind her.

Chapter 80

Gill was sitting at the table facing the glass, his hands were laced in front of him, he was pale and looked tense. I have a strangely acute memory of that moment, and closing my eyes I can recreate it as if the scene were evolving in front of me at this very instant...

Avery: Good morning Mr. Gill

Gill nods and says, "Good morning"

Avery: I am here to ask you few questions regarding the death of Janna McMurrich

Gill does not move, he just sits there waiting for the question.

Avery: On Wednesday night Janna McMurrich was found dead by her neighbours. One of them was awake and she heard some voices in the middle of the night. When she looked out the window she saw a car driving away quickly, she could not fully identify it because of the dark. But we could. There were marks on the ground, the marks coincide with those of your tires.

Gill: If I were the only one using a certain make of tires the company that sells them would have to shut down.

Avery nods, ignoring the irony of the comment.

Avery: What is the make of your tires Mr. Gill?

Gill shrugs

Gill: Pirelli

Avery: Pirelli, that's a good brand. You weren't happy with your Goodyear tires?

Gill: What do you mean?

Avery: You recently got new tires although yours were fairly new, and I wonder why

Gill is silent for a moment, then he says, "Why do you say I changed my tires? I never did"

Avery: Mr. Gill, I think you are an intelligent man. You must understand that if you don't cooperate things will be much harder for you.

Gill: I did change my tires because I wasn't happy with the other ones. Since when changing tires is a crime?

Avery: It isn't. Why did you lie about your tires a moment ago?

Gill: Why were you asking about my tires?

Avery: Where were you between Wednesday, 7 pm and 3 am of the next day?

Gill: I don't remember, this is a very busy time for me. Things slip my mind unless I write them on my calendar

Avery: Let me help you. Did you go visit Janna McMurrich on Wednesday?

Gill: I don't think so

Avery: You don't think so or you're sure you didn't go?

Gill: Wednesday you said?

Avery: That's what I said

Gill: Yes, now that I think about it I went to see Janna

Avery: How long did you stay there?

Gill: A couple of hours I would say. We chatted, had few drinks and then I left. As I said this is a busy time, I didn't want to be home too late

Avery: What was the nature of your relationship with Janna McMurrich?

Gill: We were friends

Avery: Did your relationship with Janna McMurrich go beyond friendship at any moment in time?

Gill: This is a personal question

Avery: You can choose not to answer my questions and wait for your lawyer, but I want to make you aware that cooperating will make your life easier. You help me, I help you

Gill sits and does not reply

Avery: Mr. Gill, can you tell me more about your relationship with Janna McMurrich? You met her at night at her place, was this a habit of yours?

Gill: We would sometime see each other at her place

Avery: Mr. Gill, was Janna McMurrich your lover?

Gill lowers his head and does not answer

Avery: Mr. Gill...

Gill: Our relationship went beyond friendship, but it was more of an occasional relationship than a full time one

Avery: Thank you for clarifying, Mr. Gill

Avery: Did you have any work related interactions with Janna McMurrich?

Gill: We had some exchange of opinions every now and then

Avery: Can you be more specific?

Gill: I am a scientist and so was she, we exchanged opinions regarding scientific facts

Avery: Did Janna McMurrich ever discuss with you a polymer they were synthesizing at FoodTech labs?

Gill: they synthesize many compounds, she might have

Avery: What did she tell you about the polymer?

Gill: I don't recall any recent conversation about a polymer

Avery: Mr. Gill, do you recall running some tests on a polymer synthesized at FoodTech labs?

Gill: I have run some tests for FoodTech labs in the past, it is not impossible that I have tested a polymer for them

Avery: Would you have this information in your records?

Gill: I certainly would

Avery: I can drive you to your office and verify it with you

Gill: I can verify it and let you know about it

Avery: I have no objection to this. I have few more questions for you.

Gill: ok

Avery: At which time did you visit Janna McMurrich on Wednesday night?

Gill shrugs

Gill: It could have been 8, I don't know for sure

Avery: And at which time did you leave?

Gill: A couple of hour later I would say

Avery: So you left around 10 pm

Gill: Something like that, yes

Avery: Not around 2 am?

Gill: No, that would have been way too late

Avery: Sure. And what did you do after you left?

Gill: I went home

Avery: Do you have any witnesses?

Gill: No

Avery: I have one last question for you Mr. Gill

Gill: Yes

Avery: Why was your car speeding on highway 102 at 2.15 am on Thursday?

Gill's face goes pale. "I want a lawyer", he says.

Chapter 81

Avery walked out of the room and when a moment later she opened the door I looked at her with a blank face. I felt emptied.

"So it's over", I said

"Not really", Avery said

"But clearly the man is guilty", Jack objected

“Sure, he killed McMurrich, but I have reasons to believe the circle of people involved in this affair goes beyond Gill and the cleaning lady, who, by the way, is most likely getting ready for the next move”

“She is still around...I think so and...”, I said leaving my sentences suspended in midair

“And we need to find what the people at the Cross Cancer Institute have to do with your polymer, and if they are also involved in McMurrich’s murder, although my instinct says the aren’t”

“Why?”, Jack asked

“Because Mark Gill was McMurrich’s lover, while Sandeep Raman and Wilhelm Larson were strangers to her”

“But Gill killed McMurrich because he had his own interests and placed them first”, I replied

“Not necessarily. My experience tells me that whenever passion is involved the game is never as simple as it looks”, Avery replied

I pondered what she said, perhaps she was right

“And there is another piece involved in the game”, Mariam Avery continued

“That is?”, I asked

“I haven’t told you before, but now I need to ask you some questions about it”

I looked at Jack. He was observing Mariam Avery with focused attention, and a hint of anger. I wondered what was going through his mind.

After a moment he said, “We are in this story from head to toes, don’t you think we deserve to know all the details of what is happening?”

“Not if the details are just suspicions I have and they involve the life of someone else”, Avery replied calmly

Jack sighted

“I am sorry...I am so strained though, it is just impossible to live like this, on the edge at every moment”, he said, running a hand on his forehead and on his hair.

I felt a pungent sense of guilt for having dragged him in the mess I had caused. When he raised his head his eyes met my frown.

“It will be fine though”, he said smiling, and I smiled back, sadly.

“You know that your neighbour John Wheeler left the police and is now moving to a different state. I don’t know what job he will be starting, but his abrupt move seems strange to me”, Avery said, interrupting our diversion

“Oh please, don’t tell me John is involved, please don’t”, I said, shaking my head.

A part of me thought all along he was, but I didn’t want to hear Avery confirm my suspicions

“My daughter had a baby-sitter, she was about 22, a young girl”, she begun

I nodded

“Yes, you know already. One day she mentioned she couldn’t come at the usual time because she had a doctor’s appointment. Our conversation had been vague, but she told me she had a mild allergy to some flower that grows around here. Essentially she was healthy. Later on I asked her about her allergy, and she told me they gave her a medicine. She told me it was new, “experimental” she said, but that it was supposed to work better than the other ones out there. I had objected that experimental meant that it was not tested thoroughly. She told me there were no risks associated with it, or so said the doctor. One night she was supposed to come for my daughter but didn’t. She was punctual, and when I phoned and got no answer I knew something had happened. John and I looked around her for her for the whole night, and found her floating on the lake in the morning. Dead. John took on the investigation, they said I was too involved to take the lead on it. He found some pills at her place, they were not commercial. He went around the hospitals to trace down her medical records, and found the doctor who was in charge”.

Avery paused and sighted.

“Was it Sandeep? Wilhelm?”, I asked, and thought, *was it me and my polymer?*

“No, they are not doctors”, she replied

“So?”

“But John found that the doctor who was taking care of her was in contact with Sandeep”, she said

“And Sandeep passed on experimental pharmaceuticals to this doctor for him to test them on his patients”, Jack concluded

“That is a possibility. John thought so. He was investigating about this to find out, but one day he walked in the office and told us, I’m quitting. No explanation, nothing. He remained in charge of the investigation for a while longer, but I could tell he wasn’t really working on it anymore”

“And who is investigating on this now?”, Jack asked

“I am”, Avery said

“You think Sandeep menaced John?”, I asked

“I am sure he did”, Avery replied without hesitation

“Do you think my polymer has something to do with this?”, I said abruptly

“Nobody knows what they gave the girl”

"But did you try to talk to John about it? If he was menaced maybe he knew more than he should have...maybe he discovered what they gave the girl...", I insisted

"Of course I tried to speak to John, but he won't talk"

"He was elusive with me too...", I remembered

"When was he elusive?", Avery frowned

"I've told you everything already...he was acting odd when I had gone over to dine at the Wheelers place and when I had met him after getting out of the hospital"

"Nothing else?", Avery insisted with a suspicious tone

"Well, he was driving with a woman during work hours...", I said shyly

"With a woman?", Avery asked, her eyebrows arching

"Well, I assumed she was his lover so I never told you...", I begun wishing I hadn't

"Did you see them together only once?"

"Yes"

"And why do you say she was her lover?"

"I don't know...she was leaning very close to him as he drove, and it seemed like she was crying although I cannot say for sure, I didn't have the time to look that well"

"What was she like?"

"Blond, pretty, with large breasts, and she was wearing a flowery dress..."

Avery bugged her eyes

"Ok, let me know if you remember anything else", she said, with a half reproachful note in her tone

"Will do", I said, annoyed now by her tone

After all she is keeping things from us too, right?, I thought

"Can we go home now?", Jack asked

"Let me speak to my colleague to tell him what to do with Gill and I will drive you back", said Avery

"I should phone Brad and understand what is happening at FoodTech labs, perhaps go there now. Also...", I started, remembering all of a sudden

"Yes?", said Avery

“What happened to Mike? I know for sure he never got to FoodTech labs...”, I said

“We have been looking for him with no success”, Avery said

“But he cannot just have dissolved...”

“No, and we will keep looking for him”, Avery told me

“Sure...I need to know...”, I said, almost talking to myself, my head dropping and my thoughts lingering around flecks of images, of moments together at FoodTech labs. I still couldn’t believe Mike was capable of making profit in shady ways, although so far everything pointed in this direction.

“Anyways, if you could figure out the dynamics at FoodTech labs that would help”, Avery continued

“Help?”, I asked, wondering what exactly she expected of me

“Well, we need to know how things are evolving. I have people sitting outside the FoodTech to monitor any movement there”

“You do?”, I asked surprised

“Of course. And if I could have an insider it would be even better”

“But don’t you think Iris needs a break?”, Jack said, with an edge in his tone

“I want to do this”, I said, taking his hand

He shrugged, surrendering at my insistence

“Ok, but call me”, he told me.

Then, addressing Avery, “Will you drive her back?”

“Either I or someone else will go pick her up”

“Ok”, Jack replied dryly

“And what will you be doing?”, I asked Jack

“Get my shop started again, I suppose”

“Ok guys, give me a moment and then I’ll drive you where you need to go. All right?”, Avery said, and got up without waiting for our answer.

Chapter 82

We drove with a minimal exchange of words to Jack’s house. I had the whole back seat to myself, and I let the landscape and the motion of the car lull me. When we reached our destination and the car came

to a stop I wished we could drive on for a while longer, and that I could prolong this suspended moment of non-action till I knew what to do and where to go with my life. But no, it was time to get on my feet again.

Before getting out of the car Jack turned towards me and said, "There's no need for you to stay at work for too long today. Call me when you are there and get a ride here from the detective on your way back".

I smiled a faint sleepy smile and nodded.

"Not from a colleague, from the detective", he iterated, looking at me and at Avery in turn.

"We'll make sure nothing happens", Avery reassured him, accompanying her words with a conclusive nod that meant, *you can leave the car now*.

But Jack was anxious and he before climbing up the stairs to his apartment he turned around again, and I waved a vague farewell sign with my hand, whispering, "don't worry", although Jack couldn't hear me.

"Let's go", said Avery, pressing the accelerator

She drove in silence and I gradually slept back into the peaceful semi-conscious state I had experienced earlier, till we entered the highway. Then I sliced my eyes open and saw cars rolling fast on the 4 lane street and it all flashed back in my mind, FoodTech labs, the accident, McMurrich before her death. It didn't seem true that I could get through my day without running into her and worrying about what she might ask.

"I haven't called Brad...", I said, more to myself than to Avery

Avery looked at me from the rear mirror, but didn't answer

"Perhaps I should call him...", I continued

"I spoke to him yesterday, there's a new manager in charge now", Avery told me

"Really? You should have told me before...", I started, but it didn't really matter after all

"I suppose I'll have to meet him", I continued carelessly

"Keep me informed about what you see, what the new manager decides to do with the polymer", Avery reminded me

"But shouldn't the authorities impose to stop all the research on the polymer?", I said

It occurred to me only then that this was the most obvious and simple solution

"We cannot. FoodTech is a huge corporation, and we can't just tell them to hold back a product that holds the promise of making you guys earn big bucks. Not unless we have definitive evidence. And even then it might not be so easy...", she explained

“Why do you say, you guys?”, I snapped, offended

“Don’t you work there?”

“Yes, but I am not “them””, I objected

Avery shrugged

“Anyways, what do you mean you cannot stop them even if you have evidence?”, I continued, with an unintended bitter edge in my voice

“It means exactly this. It means that when a corporation is huge it can dictate the law, or, accommodate it if you will”

“So what’s the point of finding out what’s happening?”

“The point is that my daughter’s babysitter died and my colleague’s career got screwed and now I want to see clear through this. And perhaps pin these bastards down. You’ve got to keep trying, or else you lose from the start”, Avery said, and there was anger in her voice

“I will change life”, I said, suddenly realizing I really would

“One step at a time”, she replied, her tone calm again

“No I am really...”, I began

“Wait”, Avery said sharply and I froze

“What?”

“The car we just passed. The guy who followed us at the airport is driving it”

“Did he see us?”, I asked

“I don’t know. We’ll find out soon. And I am sorry, but you’ll be late for work”, Avery said, shifting lane and slowing down while other cars passed between our car and Ronny’s.

Then Avery moved to his lane, keeping behind him while leaving a couple of cars between our car and his.

She grabbed her radio.

“Detective Avery speaking. I am on highway 102, heading west. I am following a suspect, send reinforcements”

“Received. We will send another car”

“Ok”, Avery said and put down the radio

"If the guy doesn't see us we might learn a lot from this ride", she said, her eyes fixed on the road.

We drove for about half an hour along the highway, during which Avery did her best to make our presence unnoticeable. It was hard to tell if we were succeeding or if Ronny had seen us but had decided not to change speed anyways. I had drove along this part of the highway before, but never stopped to see what was around, and there didn't seem to be much anyways. But then I saw an exit. Ronny took it and we followed. It was just our car and his on the road.

"Lay on the backseat. We can hope the guy didn't get a full look at my face, but he certainly knows yours very well", Avery told me

And so I lay on the backseat, looking at the clouds passing us by, wondering what we would do when we figured where Ronny was going, but not daring to ask and distract Avery. I felt like I did as a kid when there was an emergency, and my parents told me, "Stay here and don't move". I was tense, but then I couldn't do much about what was happening and I sat there faithfully waiting for them to fix it

Avery picked up the radio again. "I took exit 109, I am following the car"

Some fuzz and a voice. "Your colleagues are 12 miles from your current location"

"Ok", Avery said and cut the communication

She took a turn and continued driving more slowly than she had before. The asphalt became uneven. I had the feeling that we had moved onto a small street, and from what I could tell from my position there was nothing around.

"Where is this bastard going?", Avery hissed, and took the radio again

"The man is going somewhere in the fields, he turned just now in an unpaved road. If I follow him there he'll notice for sure, if he hasn't already"

Fuzz and a voice on the other side of the line. "Your colleague is 0.5 miles from you now"

"Ok", Avery said.

"I'll get him on the line"

"Mariam, this is Sam"

"I see you now", said Avery and pulled over few meters past the entrance of the road Ronny had taken

"I see you too, wait"

"Ok", said Avery, and placed the radio on its holder.

She produced a binocular from the storage compartment.

"There a rundown house there, a sort of old farm, and there's other two cars parked outside", she told me. "We'll drive there in a few moments, then I and my colleague will get out the car. You don't move, don't get out of the car and keep lying where you are now. Clear?"

"Yes", I replied

"Good", she said.

She sounded calm and in control, but was she?

I heard a noise of tires along dusty asphalt, and saw a car pulling over in front of us.

"Let's wait a few moments before we go", Avery said through the radio

"Ronny must know you were following him", replied a male voice. Sam's.

"Then why would he come here?", Avery objected

"A trap?"

"Come in my car", Avery replied, and after a moment Sam was sitting on the passenger side, and caught a glance of me lying on the back

"What?!", he exclaimed

"I was driving her to work when we spotted Ronny"

"She shouldn't be here", Sam objected

"But she is", Avery said, matter of fact

"There are three cars and at least three people in the house, and if we drive there they'll see us coming for sure. The street gives on the front entrance", she continued

"Let me see", Sam said, taking Avery's binocular

"They are walking away from the house", said Avery

"To the area where trees are", he added

"What are they doing?", Avery said

"Let's wait and see", he replied, his eyes glued on the binocular

I saw the watch. 11.01 a.m. Everything became still in the car, Avery and Sam stopped speaking.

11.05.

"They are in the woods now", Sam said

"Can you still track them?", asked Avery.

"Sort of. They are digging something out of the ground. What the hell are they doing? Ok, move, now!", Sam urged

"Luke, let's go!", he yelled into the radio

Our engine started, the wheels screeched, another car started, its noise following ours. So there was another policeman, Luke.

Avery reversed the car abruptly, and we raced across the field, the car jerking, bouncing me on the back seat.

"Don't move girl!", Sam almost yelled at me, turning briefly towards the back, before going back to the binocular

"I won't", I said, my voice shaking as I bounced

The car kept rolling fast, impossible not to notice us in the stillness of the burnt summer air.

"They are running back to the cars, bastards! They want to get away!", Sam yelled, dropping the binocular on the floor and pulling out his gun.

Avery stopped abruptly, pulled out her gun, she and Sam opened the doors almost simultaneously

"Police. Stop!", Avery yelled

The men kept running, I couldn't see much from my position but I heard gunfire, it came from the men, then another shot, from Sam, a shout of pain, another shot and a second shout. A shot back at us, Avery and Sam bending behind the doors.

"Stop!", another voice yelled from the car behind us. That was Luke

"Stop!", again and then a shot, from Luke, a shot back, and another a shot from Avery.

"Ah!", I heard, loud, painful, brutal, and a thump resonating in the Californian golden land.

I peeked from the back seat, disobeying, and saw Avery and Sam walk with determined anger, fear maybe, and then I saw Luke follow.

"Don't move girl!", they told me, but I could not help it and so I sat up, and saw three bodies sprawled on the yellowed grass.

Time dilated in an infinite present.

Ronnie, face down, his arm reaching out for a gun. It had fallen too far for him to grab it, but still he was trying, and although I knew it was us or him, it pained me to see him this way. He had told me he did not want to kill me, and a part of me still wanted to believe this was true.

The cleaning lady. She didn't move, she was crouching in the fetal position, her face distorted in a grimace of pain and her jaw dropping. Nothing but a dead body now.

Sandeep. Sandeep tried to reach in his pocket.

"Put your hands up!", Avery yelled but he wouldn't listen.

"Hands up!", she yelled again, but he kept moving his hands to his pocket.

And when they were finally in his pocket Sam hit his fist

"Ah!", Sandeep shouted, his cry inhumane, loud, resonating from this well-educated man I had met in mint-clean labs, a top notch scientist in top notch facilities. The blood spread around him.

Sam walked back to the car, took the radio.

"We need an ambulance", he said.

I was numb. I could not stitch events, I just saw fragments of time, and motion and space.

Avery crouched on the body of the cleaning lady, turned her face upwards, touches her neck to felt the veins, shook her head.

She walked towards Sandeep, Luke was already there. Sam was walking towards the body of the cleaning lady, a camera in his hands. Click, click. Lest we forget.

I opened the car door, got up. Sam saw me, making a vague gest. I felt I could hear his unspoken words, "It doesn't matter anyways"

"Did you pay these people to try and kill Iris Celati?", Avery asked Sandeep

A moan of pain

"Did you?", she repeated, her voiced rising

A fumbled no.

"What do you have to do with these people?", she kept on hammering

Another moan of pain

"What?", she asked again, keeping at him ruthlessly

Sandeep's head dropped on the side. He leg and wrist were bleeding, although the rest of his body was intact. Avery bent on him and reached for his pocket. She produced a small chain, with a charm dangling from it, and her face darkened. She placed the charm back in his pocket, leaned on her knee a moment longer.

"Fuck", she whispered.

Then she stood up, and in this erect position her traits seemed to harden.

I looked at Sandeep, my mouth glued by dryness. It felt like I would never speak again. I asked silent questions.

You were scared and you wanted your charm, is that so? You prayed for your own life, but how many people have you killed with a mint clean coat and powdered gloves?

I cannot say if what I felt was hatred or cold satisfaction.

“He passed out. Screw it”, Avery grunted, kicking the grass.

Sirens lacerated the air. Nurses walked fast with folding beds. The bodies were cleansed off the grass, but their red stains soaked the soil, uncleansed.

You can't erase it all and get away with it. Fresh starts do not exist

The sirens moved away, fading, and there silence again.

I breathed, and heard my breath. In and out, loud and rhythmical.

“Let's go find the treasure in the forest”, Sam said

The policemen started walking, and I stood behind, waiting.

We won this match. But watch us closely. Don't we all look like a team of shipwrecked losers?

Chapter 83

I leaned on the car, while thoughts about the future refluxed in me inconsequentially, punctuating long intervals of mental emptiness. Pure feelings: the hot air, the smell of the grass, the vision of the trees and of the three policemen digging something from the ground, the sound of insects and of their voices coming from a distance. The events happened moments earlier became a remote bad dream, maybe not even that. All of a sudden my brain refused to fully acknowledge what had happened. Perhaps this is how dissociative amnesia starts.

But then Susan Avery walked towards me and brought me back to reality. She had a small glass vial in her hands, sealed in a plastic bag.

“Does this look like your polymer?”, she asked

I opened the vial, looked at it, smelled it, and nodded

“Did you give it to them?”, she asked

“No, I never gave anyone this much sample...”

“Then how do they have it? Is it possible that someone else in you lab is passing it to them?”

I shook my head no.

"I don't believe so. I think they reverse-engineered my sample and learned to synthesize the polymer themselves"

"So now it could be extensively used for unknown applications", Avery said, with just the slightest question mark in her statement

"I suppose so..." , I said, shuddering at the implications

Luke and Sam had been inspecting the rundown hut while Avery and I had been talking, and now they were coming back with an expression of mixed boredom and disappointment, as that of a hunter who comes back without a prey

"There's nothing in there", said Sam

"Ok guys, let's go then", said Avery

"So what's the white stuff? Is it the chemical?", he asked in his coarse voice, tugging up his pants from the belt loops

"Looks like it is", said Avery, and looking at me for confirmation

"Ok, we'll keep this as evidence", Luke said

Avery handed him the plastic bag with the vial

"If you guys can hold on to this on your way back to the police station, I will drive Iris", said Avery

"Where to?", Sam asked, slightly arching his brows, still holding on to the belt loops

This guy must have been a bully in his teens, I thought

Avery looked at me, with a confused expression shading her face for a brief instant like a fast cloud crossing the sky

"Do you still want to go to FoodTech labs?", she asked after a pause

There was nothing I wanted, but all I said was, "Well, that was the plan. We might as well stick to it"

"Let's go then", she told me, opening my door as to make sure I followed up with what I just said, before slipping in the car herself

"See you guys at the station", she called from the window, raising a hand in farewell.

Chapter 84

I phoned Brad on my way to FoodTech labs, and from the tone of his voice I knew something was wrong even before he told me.

"Are you all right?", I asked

"When will you get here?", he asked in return, instead of answering my questions

"We had...issues on our way there, you see. But I'll be there in about 20 minutes, I would say"

"Ok, I'll go get Alice and we can drive out somewhere, talk over lunch", he replied, obviously too preoccupied to notice the oddness in my tone

"Ehm..."

"No?"

"Avery doesn't want me to drive around alone...", I explain

"Ok then, she can be our driver and eat with us. I think she should know what's happening", he replied curtly

"But *what* is happening exactly?", I insisted to know

"They told Alice and myself that we should leave in two weeks, and they'll probably tell you the same as soon as you step in the office"

"What?!", I exclaimed

"You've heard"

"And what is the rationale they gave you?"

"Vague crap"

"That is?", I pressed

"Our company has been having some difficulties and we need to do some restructuring, that's their excuse"

"I see. And I bet the restructuring plan affects only three people", I replied plainly

"Bingo", said Brad

"They are laying us off", I said, turning to Avery

"Who are 'they'?", she asked

Good question, I hadn't thought about it. "Who spoke to you about this? Who is the new boss?"

"A guy..."

"Thank you Brad. And what's the guy's name?"

"Michael Gill"

"Michael Gill", I repeated for Avery. "That's the new boss and he wants to lay us off. Do you want to have lunch with Brad, Alice and I?"

"Gill?", Avery asked

"Yes", I said, wondering why she asked

"Gill as in Mark Gill...", she commented, almost talking to herself

"Yeah, that's right...", I said, all of a sudden realizing the odd coincidence, if it was a coincidence

"We'll have to keep lunch short, but I'll join", Avery said abruptly, answering my previous question

"If you don't have time to come..."

"I do, but then there are things I want to check, among which who is this Michael Gill", she cut me off before I could finish my sentence

I nodded to her and said, "Ok Brad, we'll be there in a short while"

"Call me when you are few minutes from here and we'll come meet you at the entrance", Brad told me

"Sure thing", I said, and hang up.

Chapter 85

We went with Avery's car to a Thai restaurant 20 min by car from FoodTech labs. It was small and we were the only customers. I wondered how Avery knew about it. It certainly wasn't one of those spots you notice, and I couldn't even understand how the owners of the place could support themselves with their business.

While waiting for our food Brad and Alice had been doing all the questioning, and Avery and I all the talking: Italy, the last events, the shooting. They seemed to be reluctant to say what had happened to them, the same way I was reluctant to recall what had happened to me. I looked around, wishing I could be elsewhere.

An Asian girl came with what we had ordered almost immediately, she seemed happy we finally gave her the chance to do something. The food was tasty and cheap, and the service good in spite of the vaguely desolate feel the place had to it. We began eating, and there was a pause in our conversation.

A break, finally, I thought

Then Avery asked, "So you said they kicked you out of FoodTech labs?"

"So it seems", said Alice

"I think they want to bury the whole polymer episode, make sure nobody remembers about it so that they can move on", Brad added

"Is 'they' Michael Gill?", asked Avery

"Yes", nodded Alice

"You think this is his decision or someone else's?", asked Avery

"What do you mean?", replied Brad

Instead of answering the question Avery took her cell and dialed a number.

"Hello Luke, can you run a search for me?"

Something was said on the other end of the line

"Michael Gill", Avery replied

Another question from Luke

"What do I want to know? I want to check if he is Mark Gill's brother or relative in general"

A pause

"Yes Mark. Mark Gill. The guy I've interrogated the other day", Avery said

Luke said something, chunks of his words were audible to us but it was hard to decipher what he was saying

"I'll tell you later. I will be back to the office soon, now I am in a restaurant", replied Avery

"Around 2.30. I have to drive back Iris Celati first", she said then

Another pause

"You found him?", Avery asked, a pitch of thrill in her voice

Luke said something

"They are? Bingo!", Avery exclaimed

They were...brothers?, I wondered

"Thanks Luke, see you later", Avery said and hang up.

“Michael Gill is Mark Gill’s brother”, said Avery, looking at us with the adrenaline marking her voice with a high pitch

“Now, Mark Gill is involved with McMurrich’s death. That I am sure about, although I still don’t know how things went and why he killed her. Is Mark Gill involved with something that has to do with the polymer? Did he just run analyses for you or did he go beyond that?”, she continued, speaking quickly

“So you think Michael Gill wants to close the polymer business and get rid of us to cover up his brother?”, I asked

“I don’t know, I’m trying to understand this”, she replied, then added, “We have two brothers, the lover of one of them, a murder and a chemical that’s killing people. What is the connection?”

“Maybe McMurrich was trying to sell the polymer and Mark Gill wanted it for himself. Maybe he kept our sample when we brought it to him for the analyses. McMurrich found out and he killed her”, said Brad

“Or maybe he found out that she wanted to sell it, they had a fight and he killed her”, Alice said, reversing the perspective

“Or maybe Mark Gill didn’t kill McMurrich himself but knows who did. Maybe it was his brother”, Avery added. Her tone was enigmatic and doubtful at once

I bugged my eyes, trying to read her thoughts

“How so? Wasn’t Mark Gill at McMurrich’s place when she died?”

“Yes, but there were traces of other tires too around the house”, Avery told me

“You hadn’t mentioned it”, I frowned, wondering how many other things Avery had not told me

“I know...but now I am curious to know when Michael Gill came in town, and what was he doing the night McMurrich was killed”, said Avery

“Are you guys done here?”, asked the waitress, seeing that we had all stopped eating although our dishes were only half empty

Yes, we said, because none of us was hungry anymore. So we paid, leaving a big tip, and drove away.

Chapter 86

During the drive to FoodTech labs Avery was abstracted in her own thoughts, and none of us wanted to talk anyways. We let the road roll behind us, steaming hot under the summer sun.

When Avery dropped us at Food Tech labs she told me she would either come or send someone for me at six.

"If anything happens, call. If you want to leave before or after 6 let me know, but don't go around on your own. Clear?", she said

"Yes ma'am", I replied teasingly, making the military salute, and Avery drove away fast, barely having said goodbye.

When I walked in the building it felt like the last time I saw the place I was in another life and in another century. I knew where everything was, but it was as if I was holding in my hands a floor plan that allowed me to move around, but without any sense of personal familiarity with the environment. In the elevator I looked at the numbers ramping up with a regular blipping sound, my sense of anxiousness increasing at each floor.

"I wonder what I will do today...", I wondered out loud

"I would do my best to make myself invisible to the boss", Brad replied, smiling bitterly

"What's the point? If he wants me out I might as well learn it today", I shrugged

When the elevator opened to our floor we found a man in suit waiting for it. He looked familiar, although I couldn't locate him. But before I had the time to browse my memory's archive further, I understood from Brad's and Alice reaction that this was the new boss. I looked at him with a dumbstruck face for few seconds, before managing to put up a lopsided goofy smile and say, "Good morning".

"You must be Iris", he said

"Yes, why?", I replied, stunned by the fact he knew.

Had he been looking up my picture on the employee profiler to make sure he knew me at first sight?

"Michael Gill, good to meet you", he said smiling an overly-confident smile and tending his hand, fingers straight, palm open, wrapping me with the net of his inquisitive gaze

I took his hand and kept smiling, without talking

"I would care to speak to you. Come to my office in 15 minutes", he said, blocking the elevator door that was about to close.

Then he stepped in and the door closed before I could reply.

"Ah well, if you wanted to meet the man soon you've totally succeeded", said Brad, chuckling with bitter irony

"But from the way he approached Iris it didn't seem like Gill wanted to dismiss her", Alice intervened

"These people are assholes, not humans. You can't understand what they have in mind using the criteria that apply to you and I", Brad answered

"Ok anyways, let's go inside and wait to see, eh?", Alice said, patting my shoulder

We did, and by the time I had turned on my PC and started to familiarize myself with my work folders 15 minutes had passed.

“Good luck”, Brad said when he saw me walk away

“Yeah...ok, I’ll be back”, I said, all of a sudden carefree, because I didn’t care to keep this job anyways.

No matter what happened in Gill’s office, I knew I would make a change in my life. I still didn’t know where I would be going, but wherever that was it had to be far, very far from where I was now.

Chapter 87

I knocked the door and Gill said, “Come on in”

But when I did he didn’t take his eyes off the screen, and kept typing at his computer. I was standing at the door, stupidly waiting, and got very close to walking away. *Who do you think you are, Mr. Big Shot?* I had come here ready for manipulations and psychological tricks, and I was hostile even before I felt the disrespect. I was tired too and my patience was ice-thin.

“Should I come back at a later time?”, I asked coolly

“Please, have a seat”, Gill said raising his eyes, as if realizing for the first time I was standing there, then looking quickly at the screen again before giving up his task

Finally he looked at me with undivided attention and smiled.

“Thanks for passing by”, he told me

“Not a problem”, I said, a bit softer than a moment earlier, but keeping my guard high

“I called you to discuss how we can proceed with the next stage of your project”, Gill begun

I nodded, clueless about where all this was going

“I am aware that there are issues with the polymer you synthesized”, Gill continued and then paused, giving me a long stare

He was expecting me to say something, but I didn’t. I had no intention of exposing myself without knowing the aim of his moves.

“I know you’ve been talking to some people about it”, he went on, then stopped again.

I waited for him to continue but this time he didn’t. He just looked at me, and there was a long silence between us.

“Once a new product is engineered it is good practice to have it tested with respect to a number of...aspects”, I said at last, trying to be defensively vague

Gill nodded.

“Of course, I am aware of the fact that you are a good scientist”, he said

There was another pause

“So what do you have in mind for me?”, I asked bluntly, unnerved by the tense slowness of the conversation

“I want you to modify the polymer so that it does the same job as the one you produced, while ensuring that the product is safe for humans”, he said

Is this what he really wants or is he just pondering my reaction?, I wondered

“But maybe the one I synthesized is safe for humans, we just need to test it further to make sure”, I replied, playing dumb

“Ehm...”, he hummed unconvinced

So Gill knew the polymer wasn’t safe, but how? Had they tracked down my activities in Italy and found out about our discoveries? Or did he just know about the police investigation?

Gill looked hard at me for what seemed like eternity, then he smiled and said, “Team work works only when the communication between team members is transparent”

Sure, I thought, so why don’t we start by you telling me what you know?

“We’ve seen the polymer acts strangely on cells, but we don’t understand what is happening. We really don’t”, I said, and this was true

“Well, we want something that doesn’t act on the cells at all. We just want it to act on the food”, Gill replied

“I understand”, I said

“You and I will be working very closely”, Gill continued

Very closely?, I wondered

“I think you work well, I value you”, he added

“I appreciate that”, I said

But why was Gill lying off Alice and Brad and keeping me? I didn’t want to stay here, but I would take time.

Don’t be impulsive Iris, play along till you think over what to do.

But then I couldn’t help asking. “Who else will I be working with?”

“It will be you and I, working closely”, Gill iterated

“So far Brad, Alice and I have been a team. The polymer is the result of a joint effort”, I objected

“You could have done it alone. You *have* done it alone”, he said, and smiled again

“Why are you getting rid of my colleagues?”, I burst out before I could stop myself

“Because this project will be strictly confidential. It will be you and I. I will pay you a lot, 35% more of your current stipend, and you will come up with the product of the century”, Gill said calmly, the smile unfading on his lips

Gill looked at me intensely, pondering my reaction. I kept my face blank.

“But”, he continued, leaning forward lightly and raising a finger, “But you have to understand that we want the project to be *confidential*. We have to be loyal to each other”

At this I smiled too, a thin skeptical smile glossed with bitterness

“I will be happy to work on the project”, I replied, and got up, giving my hand to Gill for him to shake it.

He looked at me, surprised by my reaction, and shook my hand.

“So we have a deal”, he said

“We have a deal”, I said

I knew that what Gill thought he was buying was my silence, a chance for his brother perhaps, or maybe FoodTech Lab’s safety, or his own.

I smiled again, and walked out of the office thinking I would have something to tell Avery tonight.

That’s awesome, Gill bastard, pay me as many filthy dollars as you please. I’ll use your big bucks to spend on the best gun to blow up you, your damn brother and this whole fucking corporation. You bet I will.

Chapter 88

When I walked back to my desk I must have had the dirtiest look painted on my face because Brad arched his brows, coked his head and said, “You must have had some good fun behind the scenes”.

“Let’s go get something at the vending machines”, was my reply

“At the vending machines?”, Brad asked

“Why not?”, I asked

“Ok”, he said shrugging, confused at the caustic edge in my voice

“We can go to the cafeteria...but I feel like eating a junky chocolate bar first”, I said angrily

“Sure, go for it”, Brad said, twisting his mouth in a peculiar he did at times.

For the first time I realized this way he had of twisting his mouth was enticingly cute. For some reason I had never felt attracted to Brad, but I could see he was a very decent guy and I never understood why he was single for so many years, falling in and out of brief relationships all the time.

"Thank you", I said, smiling warmly all of a sudden

At the vending machine I got myself a large-sized bar with a crispy layer of biscuit inside, drenched in caramel and soft chocolate, and covered with another layer of harder, crunchy chocolate. The ultimate junk snack of our century, for just a dollar fifty.

Brad looked at it and said, "Are you having your period or something?"

I laughed. "No, but my mental state is messed up more than if I was having it"

"Ok, let's walk to the cafeteria so you can tell me what happened", he suggested

The cafeteria was completely empty, and we sat at a table in the corner, Brad with a juice and I with my chocolate bar.

"They asked me to stay, with a 35% increase in my stipend", I said

Brad stopped holding the bottle midair.

"They want me to shut up, you see. Gill must know something, although I cannot say for sure how much", I begun

"Knows something?"

"He must know about the fact that I have been trying to see clear through what is happening"

"Why do you think he does?"

"He says he wants me to make the polymer safe. When I suggested to test it rather than assume the compound we have isn't, his reply was that I had to be honest with him. Go figure that! Honest!", I said, heating up as I described my encounter

"Ok and then what happened?"

"And then he said he wants the project to be confidential, he was so insitive...confidential, confidential, it will just be you and I. And I'll pay you plenty, but you work with me and me only. A private whore essentially. Give up your freedom and your principles, I've got big bucks to buy them from you. Fuck the asshole", I said, my tone rising

Brad looked around to make sure nobody was around to hear my outburst

"Ok, slow down. He says he wants you to make the polymer safe, why are you so angry?"

“But can’t you see? Does he wants to make the polymer safe or does he want to make me a nice quiet girl? Have they circulated the polymer already? Was he involved in this in any way? And what about his brother? He is with Avery now, risking jail and perhaps even more than just that. If he just wanted to improve the formulation why did he kick out you and Alice?”, I argued, pushing myself forward and tapping on the table as I spoke

“Yeah, I don’t know...”, Brad said doubtfully

“I don’t either as a matter of fact. After all you could be dangerous too, and even more so if you are angered”, I continued

“Sure, but you’re the one who came up with the formulation and you’re the one who has been doing everything, including going overseas, to get things straight. Alice and I have sort of been following along...”, Brad said

“But now you also know about the polymer and the skeletons in the closet, right?”, I insisted

“Sure, but if you are the only one left here probably Gill thinks you’ll be more pliable than if you were surrounded by a team you trust. He probably believes he has better chances to manipulate you”

“Right, I can see his logic. Too bad I’ll have to prove him wrong”, I said, biting into what was lefty of my chocolate bar

“So you haven’t accepted his offer?”, Brad asked

“Oh, of course I have. I will stay here, work on something or pretend to work on something, buy a couple of months during which I can observe what’s happening as an insider”, I said

“But he’ll be observing you too”, Brad objected

“True, but someone has been watching over me anyways and if I leave FoodTech it is not at all a given that the paparazzi will leave me alone”, I replied abrasively

“I see your point”, Brad conceded

“Ok, let’s go upstairs and try to save the appearances, show we’re working. Perhaps I’ll give Avery a call and ask her to come get me in an hour. I want to update her as soon as possible”

“Sure, I’ll leave with you whenever you will go”

“But she said she wants to drive me home herself”, I explained, feeling an inexplicable sense of guilt, as if I was abandoning Brad somehow

“I mean, I will drive my own car home and you will get your ride with Avery. They’ll fire me anyways, so there’s no point in hanging around here long hours, all alone on top of everything else”, he shrugged

I nodded and got up, pushing my chair under the table. I felt a strange heaviness and dizziness I hadn't noticed while I was seated.

"Are you ok?", asked Brad, noticing my physical discomfort

"Ehm sure...I must be just tired and stressed I suppose", I said, uncertain about what was happening to me

"You'll be all right", he reassured me, tapping my shoulder

I didn't know if I would, but I smiled, cleaned our garbage off the table and said "Let's go", trying to sound as cheerful as I could.

Chapter 88

When I phoned Avery I felt there was anxiousness beneath the coolness of her tone, and she didn't sound happy when I asked if someone could come for me in about an hour. Couldn't I tell her before I wanted to leave early, she asked, that way she would have let her colleague know. But then she agreed to pass by herself, and I thanked her saying I would have news to share during the ride. Bad or good, she wanted to know. "Let's talk later", I said, and we hang up.

I began listlessly reading some science papers, more to use up the time than because I thought I had some use for what I was reading. I couldn't focus. I felt lethargic, not really sick but uncomfortable, the same way I had in the cafeteria. The beat of my heart seemed irregular. *Relax*, I told myself, and tried to breath in, breath out slowly, deeply. I checked the time, minutes stretched in an unbearable way. Finally it was ten to four.

"Brad, I'm going", I said without turning around

"Sure, let's go", he replied

But when I got up from the chair the room began spinning and my heart racing hard, so hard it hurt me. I gripped the desk, trying to make myself stable.

"Hey Iris, are you ok?", I heard Brad say, but I couldn't see him, black patches covering my vision

I shook my head no

"Sit down", he said, holding my arm

I stood instead, immobile, and after a moment my vision cleared

"I don't feel too hot", I said

"I see that", Brad frowned

“Ok, let’s try to go downstairs, I’ll be fine once I get home”

“Well, if you say so...I’m glad the detective is coming to get you”, he said with a worried note in his tone

I nodded and walked with Brad downstairs as steadily as I could, wondering if stress alone could be doing this to me.

Avery was in a regular car, waiting at the entrance of the building. I slipped in the car, waving Brad goodbye.

“Let me know how you feel, ok?”, he said before I closed the door

“I’ll be all right, I’ll call”, I said.

It was at the moment I fully realized that soon, very soon, I would lose my best colleague. *I’ll miss you buddy*, I told him silently, leaning back on the car seat, eyes closed and too battered to react with anger to the mounting sadness.

Chapter 89

As we drove I told Avery what had happened, looking at her at moments, keeping my eyes closed most of the time.

“I’ll get to see what these people are up to if I stay at FoodTech labs”, I explained

“Yes, but tomorrow you should stay home if you aren’t well”, Avery said

Sometimes I think she cares, she really cares about me...

“Anyways I have some news too”, Avery continued

“Yeah?”, I said

“Michael Gill worked in the headquarters of FoodTech labs in New York, with the same role as McMurrich had here. You knew this?”

“No”, I said

“He did. McMurrich was Mark Gill’s colleague at Diet Clinical, she was developing novel food preservatives, and Mark Gill was looking at the effects of the preservatives on the organism. McMurrich had come up with a new formulation, which was released it and then taken out the market. It’s hard to trace what happened, but it seems like Mark Gill raised the issue regarding the toxicity of the formulation. The facts have been blurred, and the case covered up before it could become a scandal. McMurrich and Mark Gill both left Diet Clinical after the flop of the product, either spontaneously or because they got kicked out. Mark Gill found a job at the DNA Research Center, while McMurrich was unemployed for a while. The two kept in contact, and eventually they became intimate”

"How do you know?", I asked

"People always leave traces. They write emails for instance...It's almost impossible to be truly invisible"

"You tracked down their private correspondence?"

"Mark Gill and McMurrich were lovers", Avery continued, neglecting my question

"Yes, we know this...", I said

"Michael Gill gave his brother's lover a hand and she got hired at FoodTech labs, and because of this McMurrich always remained loyal to Michael Gill. But then one day you came up with your polymer and things changed. Michael Gill wanted Foodtech labs to produce the invention of the century. You are not the only one who has been working on a polymer that increases the volumes of the foods, they were trying to come with exactly the same invention in the labs in New York"

"Really?!", I exclaimed, flabbergasted, because McMurrich had always made me believe that this was my project, and mine only

"But you got there first. They gave your polymer to the guys in New York to try and see how it worked, how it could be improved and to test its safety. McMurrich didn't want this, she felt like they were taking something from her, not giving her enough credit. The polymer had been developed in her lab and she wanted to commercialize it as soon as possible. She probably thought that if she did she could climb up the ladder"

"So this is how Micheal Gill knew that the polymer was unsafe..."

"Yes, based on the facts I have so far"

"So what did McMurrich do when she felt they were not giving her credit what I came up with?"

"There was nothing she could do"

"So all she did was vent and then...she got killed because they tried to silence her?"

"So here is the missing link. I cannot see Michael Gill killing her because of that. And it was Mark Gill who ran her over and killed her, not Michael Gill"

"So you're sure about that. Ok, but Mark Gill is Michael Gill's brother", I argued

"Yes, but you see it doesn't make sense. McMurrich's lab comes up with a polymer, the head office says it should be improved and tested, McMurrich hates this but cannot do anything about it. She is not in the position to cause damage to Michael Gill, so he has no reason to have her killed. And if he did want to have her killed he wouldn't involve his brother and come up with such an imperfect murder. The crime scene was swarming with evidence, I cannot believe the murder was planned"

"What about Sandeep? Did you interrogate him or Ronny?", I asked

“Sandeep is still unconscious”, Avery said

“And Ronny?”

“Ronny is dead”

“What? How?”, I was shocked

As we were driving a vague sense of nausea had been pervading me, I could feel it floating within me between one irregular heartbeat and the next. Now it gushed upwards, I took down the window and vomited.

Avery slowed down, pulled her car on the side. We were driving in a solitary side street not far from my home now, and all I could feel beyond the hot silence was my breath resounding in my ears, the sour taste of vomit burning my throat and my nose. I spit on the asphalt. Avery held my forehead and gave me a tissue. I wiped off the filaments of saliva dribbling from my mouth and went back to the car. I closed my eyes.

“Are you ok?”, Avery asked buckling her belt

I shook my head no.

“How did he die?”, I asked

“He stole some pills and ate them”, Avery said

“I want to do the same”, I said

“Iris. Let’s go home, I’ll stay with you for a while, then I’ll send a colleague to patrol your house. Give your man a call, he should come over to your place. It’s easier for us that way, we won’t need to send someone to check on him too. And you need support, psychological support, I mean”

I nodded faintly, feeling empty headed.

Chapter 90

I was dizzy and swayed as I walked. When I got home Avery had to hold my arm as I made my way to my bedroom. When she lay me on the bed I closed my eyes, peaceful out of sheer exhaustion, my quiet disturbed only by the speed of my heartbeats, their pace resonating in my ears. I heard Avery walk around in the room, moving something. Then I felt her come close, and when I opened my eyes I saw she had pulled a chair beside my bed and was sitting next to me. There was worry in her eyes.

“Do you want me to call Jack for you?”, she asked, and I nodded yes, before closing my eyes again

“Jack? This is Detective Avery”, I heard her say after a moment

"I am calling from Iris' place...No, she is not well"

There was a pause

"Yes, I'll be here", she concluded and hang up

"He said he will be here in about an hour", Avery told me

"Ok...", I said almost in a whisper

My sensations were muffled and my anxiousness contained. But this was a precarious equilibrium, that one hasty movement, one loud sound could break. I felt extremely vulnerable.

"Why don't you go see a doctor?", Avery suggested

"It's nothing...I just need some peace", I replied

There was a moment of silence, and then I asked, "Will you speak to Michael Gill?"

"I've asked a colleague to verify if he has been at McMurrich's place. My colleague has been in the parking lot to check his car today, and we had a policeman in disguise get his fingerprints"

"How?"

"From some objects he touched. We'll get better ones once after making a preliminary investigation"

I felt my heartbeat accelerate further, the equilibrium was broken. And then the phone rang. I moaned and stirred slightly.

"Do you want me to get the phone for you?", Avery asked

"Yes, please...", I said

It was Christine. I didn't want to speak to her, she was way too bubbly for me to keep her pace in my current state. Nonetheless I got up from the bed, slowly, and reached the phone.

"Christine...", I said

"Hey hello darling, how *are* you?", she said with her high pitched tone

"Could be better...I really don't feel too hot now. What about you?"

"I am great, I am great! But why are you not well?", she said

"Ah, there has been lots going on...", I started

"Ok, but I discovered things that might interest you!", Christine said excitedly, cutting the pause in my fading sentence

“Which news?”

“The police found out what was happening at the hospital here in New York you know, this is a piece of information that hasn’t even been released yet, but I have my ways to find out!”

“And so what happened?”

“A doctor was testing new pharmaceuticals on the patients, some were terminal and some...some could be cured with well-established methods, but he still decided to give his new products a shot”

“I see...”, I said, and felt the nausea bound like when I had been in the car

“And many patients died, there are strong indications that there is a link. I spoke with the families, they want to see clear through this and they’ve helped me understand a lot of what was happening. I also have other sources of course...”

I was listening in silence

“Are you still there?”

“Yes”, I said

“This doctor, Alfred Bloomberg, is collaborating with a guy who works at the Cross cancer institute”

“Sandeep Rana and Wilhelm Larson?”, I asked

“No, not directly. Well...they certainly know each other and there are pictures of them together at conferences and events, but Alfred Bloomberg mainly collaborates with Dr. Jonathan Woods, who practices in the same institute where Sandeep Rana and Wilhelm Larson work. Now, does Jonathan Woods collaborate with Sandeep Rana and Wilhelm Larson? Is there a circular link there? I don’t know yet, but maybe since you are there...”

“I will talk to the police...”, I begun saying

“No”, Christine cut me off, “This is unofficial information, and whatever I have learned from the police here was told to me in private, in exchange for other favours”

“Other favours?”

“Other information, other types of help”, she said

“You’re secretive now?”, I asked, and for this first time since we started talking I giggled

“I can give you the details if you want, but I don’t think you’d be interested”

“I wouldn’t be. Anyways there’s a detective I trust, I will tell her about this”

“Who is she?”

“No, I won’t tell. I don’t know if she wants me to...the situation here is messy”

“So, who is being secretive here?”, Christine poked me

I giggled again

“Ok Christine, I have to go now. I’ll call you again, but now it’s even hard to stand for me...”

“Yes yes, of course. Take care, will you darling?”

“I will Christine”

“Bye, call me back and if you don’t I’ll chase you down!”, she said, her tone merrily carefree as usual

“All right”, I said smiling and hang up

Avery was standing at the bedroom door. I had turned my back to her as I spoke and almost forgotten she was there listening to my conversation. I dragged myself back to the bedroom, collapsed on the bed and closed my eyes.

“What happened?”, she asked after a moment

I opened my eyes and saw she was on the chair again. Real scenes seemed to float in a lake of dreams, as I was under the effect of some drug. I heard my voice describe the conversation I had with Christine.

“I will have to look into this. I will call my colleague, get the investigation started”, Avery said

“Yes you should...”, I replied, smudging the words

And that’s the last thing I remember. My words, my heart beating fast and then slow down. One, two, three heartbeats, loud but far, very far, from one another. I felt the strength flow out of me. And then my eyes filled with charcoal black, and my body plunged in a state of peaceful lightness.

Chapter 91

McMurrich was sitting in her office, with the door slightly open. FoodTech labs had the same feeling to it, the same colours, temperature and smell, but the floor plan was not as it used to. McMurrich’s office used to be in a conveniently secluded spot, so that I never had to pass in front of it when walking from my desk to the lab. But now it was sitting in the middle of the hallway and, as I was heading to the labs to look for Alice, McMurrich saw me passing by and called out, “Iris, do you have a moment?”.

I stopped short, starting. Talking with McMurrich displeased me no matter when it happened, but it was even worse when I didn’t know what to expect and was genuinely busy. I gave myself a moment before replying. I breathed deeply and stepped in her office

“Sure I do”, I said.

"Have a seat", McMurrich told me

She waited for me to sit, and then looked at me for a moment before speaking. She seemed worried.

"Are you feeling sick?", she asked

I felt my heartbeats become irregular. Sick? Why would I feel sick?

"Why would I feel sick?", I repeated out loud

"Is your heart functioning normally or is it accelerating, then slowing down, and then racing again? Are you dizzy?", she continued

Yes, now I remembered. That's how I had felt, but when?

"Perhaps it did happen at some point, long ago probably"

"Long ago? When?"

"I don't remember"

"You do. Where were you?"

I tried to dig into the archive of my memories. What happened? I was at FoodTech labs, yes. Now I remembered. I was at FoodTech labs, it was my first day of work after I had come back from Italy. But why was I in Italy? Dr. Mori. Dr. Mori and the polymer, the MagnaSize. Yes, that was it. We had done tests and we had discovered...that the polymer affected the heart, it made it race till it collapsed like a strained horse.

"At FoodTech labs", I replied, not exactly knowing where this was going, but feeling a sense of unease mount inside me

"And what happened before you felt sick?", McMurrich asked

"What happened, what do you mean?"

"What did you do at FoodTech labs before you felt sick?"

"I went to the cafeteria", I said

"What about the cafeteria? What happened there?"

"I was with Brad..."

Was she playing a trick on me? What was she trying to learn?

"You guys were talking and eating?"

"Yes"

"What were you eating?", she asked

What game are we playing, mediaeval inquisitor or something?

"I don't know..."

"You do"

Did I? But wait, wasn't McMurrich dead? So she wasn't dead. Had she pretended to be dead? Like the cleaning lady. Yes, in Italy I thought I had seen the cleaning lady dead but it wasn't so.

"What I knew about was your death", I replied, grinning with satisfaction at my revenge

"I *am* dead", McMurrich said calmly

"Ah so you are dead and I am dead and this is a sci-fi movie", I laughed hysterically

"What were you eating?", she insisted, ignoring my reaction

"A chocolate bar", I said, remembering

She nodded

"Have that chocolate bar analyzed", she told me, looking at me straight in the eyes

"Why?", I asked, more and more uneasy

"Time is over, I am busy now", she said, moving her eyes on the computer screen

"Tell me why", I insisted as I would have never done in other moments

"You are so innocent, how can you not understand?", McMurrich said with a hint of ironic despise in her tone

"What are you referring to?", I asked again in angry panic

But before I could get an answer the lights in her office flashed, grew bright and blinded me. Through my blurred view I saw two figures. I wanted to ask them who they were but all I could utter was a moaning sound.

Chapter 92

"Iris...", I heard

Jack. Yes, this was Jack, but what were we doing? Where were we?

I opened my eyes slowly. He was standing beside my bed, and this bed – I immediately knew – was not mine. I looked at my arms and saw a fluid being infused into me with a needle, a drop at a time. I turned my head slowly, the room swirled. Then I saw Avery, her features fuzzy but recognizable.

“I had to call 911 and have them bring you to the hospital”, she explained

“What happened exactly?”, I asked with a furred voice

“You didn’t feel well, I drove you home and all of a sudden you passed out”, she told me

I began to remember.

“For how long have I been unconscious? What time is it?”, I asked

The day was bright and the light seeped through the windows, its intensity sliced by white shades. It could have been 10 am or 4 pm, it was impossible for me to tell. Avery pointed at a clock on the wall. 5.15, it said. I hadn’t noticed the clock before, although I would have sworn I had looked into that direction when I woke up.

“I had a strange dream, you know...”, I begun

“What did you dream?”, asked Jack, caressing my forehead

“McMurrich was in her office, she insisted that I remember what I ate. I told her I had a chocolate bar before leaving FoodTech. Analyze it, she told me, but then she wouldn’t say why...I woke up before she told me why...”

Jack stopped his hand on my forehead, looking at me with the worried expression of a mother who just realized her kid has very high temperature.

“What?”, I asked, and since he wouldn’t reply I turned to Avery.

Her eyes were bugged, and she looked at me with a clouded face.

“What’s happening guys?”, I asked again

“Well, what McMurrich’s ghost told you makes a lot of sense”, Avery said at last

“Why? What do you mean with McMurrich’s ghost, I was just talking about a random dream...”, I asked, but even before Avery spoke the nightmarish vision of what had happened began forming in my mind

“Why?”, I repeated, the despair resounding in the three letters and breaking my voice

Avery produced a tape recorder from a black bag she had laid in a corner. Still crouching, she raised her eyes and looked at Jack, asking for an answer to a question I didn’t know. He stood there looking at her with a dark expression, without moving.

“Mark Gill confessed”, Avery said at last, pushing on her knee to get up

“Did he kill McMurrich?”, I asked

“Do you want to listen to this?”, she replied, holding the recorder in her hand

My head was spinning and a lump tightened my stomach. I nodded slowly. Yes, I replied in silence, *let me hear about this. Yes, go ahead and tell me, I want to know how my game has produced a lethal discovery, which now gnaws on my wasted body and my exhausted mind. Every suicide knows how he gets to end his days, why shouldn't I?*

Chapter 93

Avery turned on the tape recorder.

Background noises, chairs being moved.

Avery: Mr. Gill, what were you doing on between 7 pm of Wednesday July the 25th and 3 am of July the 26th?

Mark Gill: From 7 to about 7.30 I was at home, and then I met Janna McMurrich

Avery: where did you meet her?

Mark Gill: at her place

Avery: were you and Janna McMurrich the only two people at McMurrich's place?

Mark Gill: no

Avery: Who else was there?

Mark Gill: Michael Gill

Avery: Are you related to Michael Gill?

Mark Gill: Yes. He is my brother

Avery: Did you and your brother arrive and leave Janna McMurrich's place at the same time?

Mark Gill: Yes, approximately

Avery: can you be more precise about the timing? Who got there first and who left first?

Mark Gill: I got there first and left before Michael did

Avery: at which time did you leave?

Mark Gill: Around 1 am, I would say

Avery: Could it have been later than that?

Mark Gill: No, I don't think so

Avery: why don't you think so?

Mark Gill: because when I got in the car I remember checking the time and it was approximately 1

Avery: do you have witnesses?

Mark Gill: no

Avery: did you go home immediately after leaving from the house when Janna McMurrich lived?

Mark Gill: I drove around for a while, to get some fresh air

Avery: Is this something you usually do? Drive around to get some fresh air?

Lawyer: This question is not relevant to the case

Avery: In a previous conversation with you we assessed that your car was speeding on the highway at 2.15. Why were you around at 2.15?

Mark Gill: as I said, I wanted to get some fresh air

Avery: Other than driving on the highway, where did you go get some fresh air?

Gill: I don't remember exactly, I drove around Janna's neighbourhood, it's a nice neighbourhood...

Avery: for how long did you drive around Janna's neighbourhood?

Gill: I don't know...half an hour, maybe more...

Avery: and where did you go after that?

Gill: I don't remember exactly. I was around here place for a while...and then I began heading home

Avery: and you used the highway to get home

Gill: yes

Avery: the highway is the fastest route from where Janna McMurrich lived to your place, and the exit closest to your area is exit 8. At the speed at which you were driving it must have taken you approximately 15 minutes to reach exit 8 from the moment you entered the highway. A camera shot a picture of your car speeding at 2.15 am, which means that you had started driving on the highway shortly before that.

Gill: I don't know, maybe the watch on my car was wrong then...or maybe I drove around Janna's neighborhood for more than 30 minutes

Avery: what was the purpose of your visit to Janna McMurrich?

Mark Gill: it was just an evening among friends

Avery: Last time you said you and Janna McMurrich were in an intimate relationship

Mark Gill: Not so intimate, occasional I would say

Avery: Michael Gill had a professional relationship with Janna McMurrich, is this correct?

Mark Gill: Yes, but Janna and Michael were also friends

Avery: Were they friends before they started working together?

Mark Gill: no

Avery: it seems like a strange coincidence that you and Michael Gill are brothers, that Janna McMurrich is your lover and your brother's friend

Lawyer: this question is not relevant. Mark, you don't have to answer if you don't want to

Avery: I will get my answers one way or the other, but if you make things easier for me I will make things easier for you

Mark Gill: I knew Janna from grad school, our research groups had some collaboration going on and we published a paper together. We kept in touch after we graduated, and we worked for a while in the same company, Diet Clinical. After a while I moved on, and got the current position. Janna was not making the greatest career at Diet Clinical and when I knew from Michael there were opportunities at FoodTech I gave her a hand.

Avery: You asked Michael to give McMurrich a hand?

Mark Gill: Yes, and so she got her current position

Avery: Thank you. So what was the position your brother Michael had with regard to what was happening with the polymer synthesized at FoodTech labs?

Mark Gill: what do you mean? What polymer?

Avery: Recently Iris Celati synthesized a polymer at FoodTech labs. I know you ran analyses on this polymer.

Mark Gill: It is possible, I don't exactly remember though

Noise of papers being moved on the table

Avery: Look at these analyses. You ran these tests and gave these results to Iris Celati. Do you remember now?

Mark Gill: Yes, I am starting to remember now...

Avery: Good. The polymer could bring huge economic benefits to food companies, but its effects on human health have not been tested. Did Michael Gill believe the polymer should be released or did he have concerns?

Lawyer: How is this relevant to the investigation?

Avery: Mr. Gill?

Mark Gill: Why don't you ask him? How would I know about this?

Avery: did you and your brother go to Janna's McMurrich house to discuss the polymer? Were you there to act as a mediator?

Mark Gill: no, it was supposed to be an evening among friends

Avery: Michael Gill lives in the States. He is the head of the FoodTech lab office in New York. Why was he in town?

Mark Gill: He is my brother. He came to visit.

Avery: Your brother was staying at your place?

Mark Gill: yes, why?

Avery: Is it a case that your brother flew to the States right after the murder and came back shortly after to take over McMurrich's position?

Lawyer: if you are implying that my client murdered McMurrich to put his brother in her place, you are making is pure speculation. Mark is not expected to answer questions that concern his brother

Avery: unless he is involved in his brother's doings

Avery: Mr. Gill, when you tested the polymer you saw that was it did on the bacteria was strange, very strange, and understood that a product like that could not be released. At least not before its safety was tested further. You didn't tell Iris Celati or her colleague, but you phoned your lover, Janna McMurrich, and told her to be careful. She didn't listen. So you called your brother in the head office and told him what was happening. He begun the testing in NY and understood you were right. He called McMurrich and tried to reason with her, but she wouldn't listen to your brother either. She felt this was her chance to become a big shot, she wanted to claim that her own research group had come up with the discovery of the century. She felt that information was starting to leak, and that the creator of the polymer herself had doubts about the safety of the product. Janna McMurrich wanted to release the polymer immediately. So Michael came over to meet Janna McMurrich in person, and the two of you went to her place to discuss business. You tried to talk her into producing a second generation polymer, which was equally effective but safe. Janna McMurrich is a determined woman though. Around 12 pm Michael Gill gave up and left. You two both have the habit of speeding, and he was driving along the highway 20 km

above the limit at 12.15. But you couldn't give up. You stayed with Janna for longer, perhaps cursing her greediness, perhaps trying once again to reason with her, but you didn't have more success than your brother. Perhaps she even accused you of wanting to spoil her career as second time, after you had done the same at Diet Clinical. When you worked there with her you had alerted her about the risks of her formulation, am I right?

Silence

Avery: So around 2 am you got up, angry and shouting, and told McMurrich to go ahead if she wanted to. Maybe you menaced to break your relationship with her, maybe you shouted to report her to the police, and started the engine of your car blind with rage. You just wanted to leave, efface this night and this relationship. Janna was outraged too, and she ran after your car as you were driving off. It was dark and after drinking one glass after the other your anger was fully fueled and your senses numbed. Janna wasn't in a much better state, and after chasing your car she managed to catch up, and jumped in front of it trying to stop you. You pressed the break a moment too late. You got out of the car and saw her lying on the ground, a pool of blood spreading around her. She was still alive, but you didn't realize that. You panicked. You stared at Janna's wasted body for a moment and thought you'd killed her. If you had called for an ambulance she would probably be still alive, but you drove away instead. Janna McMurrich died hemorrhaging after about one hour after your car hit her.

Silence

Avery: Mr. Gill, is this how things went?

Silence

Avery: Mr. Gill?

Lawyer: do you have anything that proves your version?

Avery: I do

Lawyer: what proofs do you have?

Avery: Mr. Gill, you lied about the fact that you left from McMurrich's place before your brother did. I could have just used the pictures of your car speeding up to know, but I also spoke to your brother and he confirmed. So you were the last one to see Janna McMurrich alive. Somebody ran her over, and that person was driving a car with the same tires your car had before McMurrich's death, before you changed them to try and cover up what had happened

Lawyer: it is not illegal to change tires, and tire imprints are not a final proof. Mark was there, who says nobody else was there after him?

Avery: Mr. Gill, I think you are an intelligent man. Why don't you just tell me what happened?

Sound of chair moving, deep breaths, sobs

Mark Gill: I didn't mean to kill her

Avery: I know

Mark Gill: I've loved Janna since I met her. I suppose she didn't as much...she never wanted to marry me. But I love her...I love her...

Sobs

Mark Gill: But Janna began commercializing the polymer...all she cared for was her career, her success, and she wanted to get there whatever it took

Avery: Janna McMurrich circulated the polymer? Is any food company using it now?

Mark Gill: Yes. I found out by chance, she left a file open on her PC and I saw...I saw she sold it to HealthyFood Inc. Do you understand the implications? This company is huge...no matter what we did after Janna gave them the polymer would be disastrous. HealthyFood is a major client of ours. If we took the polymer back after they had begun using it FoodTech labs would have lost its reputation and, most of all, my brother would have lost his reputation. And if we didn't take back the polymer back...the consequences would be dire.

Avery: FoodTech labs would risk legal prosecution

Mark Gill: no, not really...when Janna gave HealthyFood the polymer she had the company sign an acknowledgment form stating that only certain tests had been conducted by Foodtech labs. Those tests showed no adverse effects on human health, but this didn't imply that other tests could not – and should not – be conducted. See the trick?

Avery: But you suspected the product was not safe

Mark Gill: I did, but the legislation prescribes only certain tests for this type of products. Legal and good are distinct concepts

Avery: so releasing the polymer was not an illegal act?

Mark Gill: It wasn't, but if the polymer ended up by poisoning people then – legal or not legal – it would damage the reputation of FoodTech labs and my brother's, and that is what my brother cared about. FoodTech labs and HealthyFoods are powerful and have the freedom to make some mistakes, but there was no reason to release the product immediately, the risk was too high...

Avery: why was it too high?

Mark Gill: because I have never seen a chemical additive do to bacteria what this one did.

Avery: do you know if HealthyFood is already using the polymer?

Mark Gill: I don't, but likely they are using it

Avery: Why does your brother want to keep Iris Celati while he fired all her collaborators?

Mark Gill: he wants her to produce a new polymer, safe and equally good, to try and make up for a possible flop with the one Janna released...to make sure FoodTech Labs doesn't have a major collapse

Avery: but why not keep the whole team?

Mark Gill: My brother says he wants to keep everything top secret. He wants to control Iris Celati closely, rather than have her surrounded by a team of buddies with too much personal initiative. He wants Iris Celati to be a tool for FoodTech labs, he wants her to make a new polymer and disappear

Avery: disappear?

Mark Gill: yes

Avery: He wants to kill her?

Mark Gill: I don't know, ask him

Avery: you said your brother cared about the reputation of FoodTech labs and his, and what did you care about?

Mark Gill: I wanted a family empire, with Janna as a wife and collaborator, and my brother as business partner. If only Janna hadn't released this polymer we could come up with a better one and open a new company that could fly...but not after spoiling everything with a flawed product

Avery: so that is why your brother wants to keep everything as secret as possible now? Because he wants to come up with a product that might allow you to open the dream company you had planned to start?

Mark Gill: Maybe...yes, he was still trying to save the plan. But nothing makes sense now, nothing...

Avery turned off the tape recorder. I looked at her and began laughing, and then my laughter turned into sobs, light at first, then dense, uncontrollable, shattering my exhausted body with painful throbs.

Chapter 94

Once the tape stopped Avery and Jack stood there in silence. I felt as if I was being sucked into empty space, devoid of all but my sobs. I cannot say how much time elapsed, but at a point I remember I became emotionally detached. I was aware of what was happening, and I knew that my chances of survival were slim, but all this stopped mattering to me.

"So this is how it all ends", I said, feeling an odd sense of peace and relief

End.

It seemed like I had an easy way out after all. I didn't even need to have the guts to decide it for myself, it would just happen. Anytime. It would probably strike me before I realized.

"No, I will talk to Mori. He said he would be working on finding an antidote, didn't he? There will be a way out. There must be", Jack said, his voice unsteady

"Maybe, or maybe not. And if there is, the question is how long it will take to find it. Research takes time, why be delusional about this?", I replied coolly

What was happening seemed all so logical, there was no reason to be emotional about it. If you believe in your research you should take the consequences of it, shouldn't you? I had chosen to play a game, and I had my share of fun. I had manipulated the game for a while, and now it was manipulating me.

I *wanted* the polymer to destroy me, its creator, I *wanted* to die. The more I thought about it, the more perversely euphoric I felt. *Drag me all the way down to hell, I want to know what it looks like!*

Avery's voice cut off my thoughts.

"I will go talk to Sandeep", she said

"Oh yes, I forgot about him...is he conscious now?", I asked

"Yes, but he refuses to speak. Anyways the doctors told me that he can be dismissed in one or two days at most, and at that point I will put a tight torque on him. And he'll speak, believe me", Avery said

"Try to understand if other people are at risk...please", I said

"I'll talk to Mori...", Jack iterated, uninterested in all but getting me out of the hospital

"Ok", I replied, shrugging my shoulders carelessly

But then I saw the distress on Jack's face, the sorrow ponding in the sockets of his tired eyes.

"Ok, let's see if Mori has a solution", I said, making an effort to warm up my voice and smile.

Jack moved close to me, and took my hand. He held it for a while, squeezeing it tight, then tighter, as if this way he could prevent me from slipping away.

"Don't give up, please don't give up", he begged

"I won't", I said for his sake

Jack nodded and headed towards the door. "I'll be back tomorrow after doing some research", he said

I smiled again. I let my gaze follow him to the door, and rest on him in that imperceptible instant of hesitation during which he turned around once more before stepping away

"I'll leave too, and will be back tomorrow", Avery said after a moment

"Anytime, I'm not going anywhere", I replied, my tone and smile ironically bitter now

Avery shook her head, and headed to the door. But then she turned around

“Even if you don’t care to stay alive other people care that you do”, she said, as if reading my thoughts, and walked away before waiting for my answer.

Chapter 95

After Avery and Jack left I fell in and out of sleep, losing track of time. Past events, nightmarish visions of the future and sparks of hope all mingled in an incoherent sequel, fragmented by the greyish-white view of the hospital’s room, by the regular blipping of the machine to which I was hooked, by the clear fluid dripping into my veins.

I was dreaming I had been locked down in a basement. There were people outside I could see from a window, I could hear the voices of the kids playing and I could see their mothers pushing them on small bikes, encouraging them to pedal. “Help!”, I screamed at the top of my lungs but they couldn’t hear. Then I tried propping the window open, but I couldn’t get it to slide, something was causing it to be stuck, but it was impossible for me to see what it was. While I was sweating and cursing in my struggle, feeling the tide of panic rise within me, one of the mothers outside saw me. I waved at her with frenzy, and for a moment it seemed to me that she was heading towards me. *I’ll be fine*, I thought, and a wave of relief refreshed me for the briefest moment, before I realized she had changed her mind, and had decided to turn away as if she had never detected my presence. I started scratching the glass, fast, faster and then so fast my nails begun to bleed. I knew this wasn’t going anywhere but I kept at it, crazed by the fear, and with the smell of blood invading my nostrils as if I was drowning in it. Then there was a shuffling sound coming from the door.

“Go away!”, I shouted

“Iris...”, I heard

“No, no, go away!”, I shouted again, sure that whoever kept me locked there had come to give me the final blow

“Be quiet Iris, I am not here to hurt you...”, the voice said

“No!”, I yelled again, or maybe I wasn’t yelling but in my half-conscious state I believed I was

Then I felt someone touch my face and I woke up fully. Through the dim light of the room I saw Sandeep’s face. I could have screamed again, but all I did was stare at him, numbed, my eyes wide open.

“Things are not like you think they are and I am not here to hurt you”, he told me again

“We are in this same hospital? Where is the security?”, I asked after the first stupor, strangely curious rather than scared at this point.

I figured he wasn’t there to hurt me, but then why was he there?

“The security guy left. Strange...I don’t know for how long he’ll be away, there isn’t much time”

“Time for what?”, I asked

“For telling you the real story”

I wondered if I was still dreaming. My head felt heavy and I was nauseous. But I wanted to know, regardless, in dream or reality it didn't matter. Anyways if there was any difference between the two it had become very hard for me to define it.

"Tell me", I said

"When you brought the samples I started running the tests you asked me, to find out what you needed to know", Sandeep begun

"Yes"

"And Wilhelm was doing much the same", he continued

"Then what were you doing with two armed people the day you got shot?", I asked

"Wait and listen. There is a person working at the Cross-Cancer institute, he has been testing chemicals on patients, without making them aware of the possible side-effects. I suspect he has killed people that way, as a matter of fact I am reasonably sure about it"

"Who is this man?"

"Jonathan Woods. I was collaborating with this man before I found out what he was doing"

"Why did you never report him?"

"It's not that easy. He menaced to hurt my family if I said anything, you know? And by the way, there was a policemen investigating about this, he came to talk to me and then he was gone"

"John?"

"Maybe, I cannot recall his name now"

"Bald, green eyes and a bit stocky?"

"Yes"

"He was investigating about the death of a young girl..."

"Yes, but the whole story was buried in silence. Woods has lots of protection from big shots, corporations, he is pretty much untouchable"

"So he can just keep killing people unpunished?"

"Let me continue, they might find me here anytime. Woods found out about your polymer, don't ask me how, he went through that data we collected and he figured it altered the behaviour of cells. When I figured what was happening I deleted all the data, but it was too late. I explained the situation to Wilhelm, and I told him we should get rid of all the polymer we were storing"

"But you took some away and brought it out in the fields and buried it..."

"No, Woods did that. He wanted to know how to synthesize the polymer, but it was hard for him to reverse engineer it, he needed time. He stole some of the sample you brought us and hid it where you found me with the police"

"How did you know where he kept it?"

"Ronny found out"

"Did you hire him?"

"No, not exactly...his daughter was a victim of Woods practices. Ronny is a private investigator, and he knows where to look to get his answers. He dug out the people who had collaborated with Woods, and to make a long story short he found me and we teamed up"

"To kill me?"

"No, to make sure you kept what you synthesized as secret as possible to prevent further damage"

"What about the cleaning lady? She tried to kill me, and that's a fact"

"She tried to kill you *before* Ronny and I made contact with her"

"When did you make contact with her?"

"After you got back from Italy"

"What about when she faked being dead?"

"She had followed you to kill you, but then you saw her. She wanted you to lower your guard and pretended she was dead. Then Ronny got a hold of her and we convinced her that to reach her objective it was more effective to stay on our side than try to kill you"

"But why was she trying to kill me to begin with?"

"Because you were involved – unknowingly – in killing her sister"

"Her sister? What? What do you mean I killed her sister?", I asked, my voice pitching involuntarily

"Your polymer. Woods used it on her sister, perhaps he thought it could cure what she was affected by...but she was quite healthy, her pathology was a very small one, certainly curable with conventional methods, and after his trials she...", Sandeep started, but his sentence ended in midair as a policeman propped the door open, holding a gun

"Stop!", he shouted pointing it at Sandeep

"He is not trying to harm me", I said, almost in a whisper

"Hands up!", the guard shouted, ignoring me

Sandeep obeyed. The guard approached him and pounded him against the wall. Sandeep fell almost immediately.

"Don't hurt him, he was not trying to attack me!", I said, and this time my voice was loud and firm

But the policemen pushed Sandeep's face on the floor, keeping his gun at him, and handcuffed him. Sandeep's eyes were closed, and he was silent. I wondered if he had passed out as he lay on the floor, and I felt deep compassion for this man.

And what had I done?

“Because you were involved – unknowingly – in killing her sister”

Who had I killed, who had I killed, who had I killed, who had I killed...

Chapter 96

The policemen pulled out the radio with one hand while keeping Sandeep pinned to the ground with the other.

“Avery, this is Logan”

“Everything ok?”

“I found your man in Iris Celati’s room”

“Did you stop him?”

“He is handcuffed and unconscious”

“I’ll head there now. Make sure the man doesn’t get away”

“You bet”, the guy said, and stuck the radio back onto his belt

“Are you all right miss”, he asked, looking up at me, but before I could answer a nurse came rushing into the room

“I’m perfectly fine, the man was just talking to me, not menacing me in any way”, I said as calmly as I could, talking to both the nurse and the policeman

The nurse shot an alarmed look at Sandeep and then at the machine blipping beside me, counting every one of my heart beats. Their rate had increased, I think, or maybe they had been like that when I was sleeping and I hadn’t noticed.

The nurse rang the bell and after a moment another nurse arrived. When he saw Sandeep on the floor a shocked expression shot across his face.

“What happened?”, he exclaimed, “I’ll go get a doctor!”

“No, get a stretcher first. We’ll get the doctor after bringing the man to his room”, the senior nurse replied authoritatively

I didn’t like her, but she seemed to have a strong hold on the other nurse, a trim boy much younger than she was. He left swiftly and came back before I knew it, bringing away Sandeep, followed by the police officer.

“What will happen to him?”, I asked

"I'll give you some tranquilizer", said the nurse instead of answering my question, and produced a syringe that she filled with fast precision

"Take care of the man on the floor that was lying on the floor rather than stuff me with drugs!", I replied angrily

"You are in a critical condition", the nurse insisted, "and we must make sure your conditions don't deteriorate"

"I realize that, but if you overdo the drugs my reaction to those that are really needed might be very different from what you expect...if there can be any expectations at all, considered that the stuff I synthesized and ingested does all but what it is expected to do on cells and organs"

"I can't force you, although..."

"Thank you, but I do not want the tranquilizer for now", I interrupted

"As you wish. Call me if you need me", she told me, leaving the room with quiet steps

I lay with my eyes closed, hearing the voices in the room as if I was listening to them from elsewhere. I had the perception that someone had come close to my bed, but I kept my eyes shut. And then it was silent again.

I lay in bed for an indefinite amount of time, losing track of the hours, not sleeping but unable to formulate consequent thoughts. What Sandeep had told me kept rolling in my mind, and I was angered by the brutality of the policeman. If only Avery had been there instead of that caveman...but wasn't she supposed to be here by now, I wondered? Certainly she would come see me, and I would tell her what Sandeep had told me before he got smashed on the floor. I felt I was the only one Sandeep would talk to, and that I had to see him again to get the pieces of the puzzle together. The doctors would object, maybe Avery and Jack would object too, but I *needed* to know. *"Because you were involved – unknowingly – in killing her sister"*. The words pounded in my mind till they knocked me down into a restless sleep.

I woke up to the sound of light steps coming into my room. I saw Avery walk in and hesitate halfway through the door.

"It was about time you came", I groused with a low voice made hoarse by sleep

"I am sorry I wasn't here before", Mariam replied apologetically

"It's ok, I'm sorry...Sandeep was telling me unexpected things, before your colleague jumped on him and knocked him unconscious"

"What did he say?", Avery asked, and listened to my account without interrupting

But when I stopped speaking she said, "But something is not quite right"

“What do you mean?”

“So there’s a doctor who tests experimental cures on relatively healthy patients. He takes your polymer and uses it on someone who then dies”, she summarized

“Yes”

“So why go after you rather than after the doctor?”, she asked

“I hadn’t thought about it...maybe the cleaning lady was planning to but chose to start from me?”

“Maybe, but something is telling me we are missing something. I’ll try to find Jonathan Woods and see what he has to say”

“But is Sandeep still unconscious?”, I asked

“He is sedated now, I’ll try to talk to him tomorrow”

“I should talk to him tomorrow”, I said, marking the “I”

“Theoretically you shouldn’t...”

“But you realize it would make things easier, much easier”, I insisted

“I do. But how are you feeling?”

“Not as good as I would if I knew the whole story”, I replied

Avery expression clouded, and she was silent for a while

“I need to know”, I iterated

“I am worried that what you are going to learn is going to be too hard on you”, Avery said at last

“And you are not to blame for the misuse of what you produced without intention of circulating it without adequate testing”, she added

“I don’t need sugar coatings, but facts”, I answered dryly

“Ok Iris”, Avery said, with a soft fondness in her voice

“I wonder why you care...”, I said

“Care about what?”

“About me”, I replied

“I am doing my job, that’s all”, Avery replied, her tone hardening

Avery was that type of woman who had feelings but didn't want you to know, out of an instinct of self-protection I suppose

"So you'll bring me some news tomorrow?", I asked, trying to pull back and give Avery the space she needed

"I will if I have them", she said curtly

"Thank you", I replied with a remissive tone

"Thank you for the information", Avery said softening, "and be well"

When Avery left the room I was saddened by her sudden coolness. I felt that what I said triggered something in her, but I couldn't understand what. Or was I imagining it all?

I fell asleep shortly with the image of Avery frowning upon me, and emerged from sleep to Jack's worried frown, observing me through the red rims of sleepless eyes.

Chapter 97

"Hey", I whispered

"hey", Jack said in return, touching my cheek with the tip of his fingers, as if worried that anything more than the slightest brush could hurt me

"I've spoken to Mori", he said, and paused

"I've also called Fred, my PhD advisor, do you remember him?", he continued

I nodded slightly, waiting for Jack to add more. He looked at me, as if pondering the details of my features, and from the silent grief in his eyes I knew the news weren't good.

I smiled.

"They told you there's nothing they can do, is that it?", I asked

"No, not exactly. Well, that's more or less what Fred told me. He knows a researcher who is now retired, but whose name was a big one in the old times, and he promised he will contact him for advice. This is too far from a solution though..."

"Ok, and what about Mori?", I asked, to show that I hadn't slipped into a passive state of acceptance more than anything else.

Jack sighted

"He is trying, but it's taking time"

Don't let Jack down, he is the one that needs support now, I thought.

"Of course", I replied smiling

"He wasn't very optimistic, I suppose he doesn't want to give us false hopes", Jack said dropping his head

I saw a tear roll down along his cheek, and I pictured it splash on the floor. Then another, and a then a third

"Wait to cry before you're sure you have a reason to", I said, and laughed, "Why, maybe we'll go to Italy again to meet Mori, this time with nobody's shadow at our back"

Jack stared at me with a surprised look, peeking through the tears with renewed hope.

"Do you mean what you just said?", he asked

"What did I just say?"

"That we can go to Italy again to meet Mori"

"Well sure, once I'll step out of bed"

"Or maybe we can go without waiting, so that you'll step out of bed sooner"

I began to understand where this was going, although the idea seemed pure insanity

"You want to bring me there *now*?", I asked skeptically

"Would you want me to? Mori thinks he'll have better chances of finding a solution if we go there. He has all the instruments he needs there, and he can also count on his team...when Mori suggested that we go there I told him you were too weak to be moved around, but if you are willing to give this a try I'll call him and let him know we've changed our mind"

Jack's voice gained energy as he spoke, as if my chances had increased by our sheer will of finding options. The idea of seeing Mori again gained the weight of a reality in my mind, and the details of his features, his office, his voice, remerged in my memory. I didn't know if I could make it to survive the trip to Italy, but the thought of meeting Mori again thrilled me. I felt, without knowing why, that I *had* to see him again, at least one more time.

"Ok", I agreed

"Ok?", Jack asked, smiling incredulously

"Ok", I repeated

Jack laughed, and bent to hug me, and I felt the strength of his flexible body and the tension of his muscles dissolve in this moment of hope

"But there is one more thing I must get straight before we go", I said

"What is it?"

"I have to speak to Sandeep. I must know the end of the story to close the circle, you see?"

"To close the circle?", Jack asked with a puzzled expression

"Yes. If Mori finds a cure for me he will find a cure for all the other people I might have made ill, and probably have made ill, with my polymer. And for those who will get sick in the future if the polymer is still around. Do you follow me?"

"Yes and no..."

"If I go to Italy and Mori succeeds I will close one of the loops. But Sandeep said I have killed someone, and that this person's relatives wanted to kill me to wash out the crime with my blood"

Jack looked at me with a questioning gaze

"I need to know the details of what happened to close this second loop too", I explained

"What do you mean by closing the loop?"

Jack gave me an odd look, then shrugged, letting go whichever questions he had on the tip of his tongue. Perhaps he was worried about my answer, perhaps he was too eager to move me out of bed to pause on any detail outside his scope.

"I'll go call Mori, I think he'll be happy to hear that we're going", Jack said

"Sure", I replied smiling, "and if you can please hand me my cell I'll phone Avery to know how Sandeep is doing"

Chapter 98

Come on Avery, pick up the damn phone, I thought as the line rang free with unnerving regularity. I was about to give up when I heard Avery's hasty voice on the other side.

"Hello", she said

"Is this a bad moment for me to call you?", I asked

"No, I was just...did you need to tell me something", Avery replied tensely, the question sounding somewhat like a statement

"Yes. I am calling about Sandeep, I need to talk to him again", I replied with abrupt quickness

"Strange"

"What is strange?"

"The fact that I was in his room just now, but he says that before talking to me he needs to talk to you"

"Ehm?"

"Yes, that's what he said"

"Well, if this time that colleague of your doesn't knock him over perhaps he can finish telling me what he had started to", I replied critically

"The whole point is that I don't want him to talk to you, but to me", Avery objected

"Why is that? It's not like I will keep secrets for myself, I think..."

"That's beyond the point. You should not experience strong emotions because you could..."

"Because my heart could go wild at any moment. Because I could die. But I need to know before I die", I answered with unnerved determination

"You will not die", Avery said

"Sure I won't. I will actually go to Italy after talking to Sandeep"

"What?!", exclaimed Avery

The stupefied reaction I had obtained entertained me for a moment

"I'll explain if you drop by. But can you please arrange for me to talk to Sandeep?", I said

"No"

"Listen. If I talk to him I'll be able to make sense out of what is happening, no matter how dark the facts I will learn about. And I will trace the conclusion of all this, as it seems right to me"

"Define the conclusion? I am not sure I understand what you are trying to tell me but if you insist...I told you I just got out of Sandeep's room, I'll be over in a moment after asking a nurse to get the guy on a wheelchair over to your room. It won't be easy to convince them, but I'll try"

"Thank you", I said

"Ehm", was Avery's reply, and then she hang up

Chapter 99

I didn't really think they would allow me to see Sandeep. I expected to sit there and wait for an indefinite amount of time, and to see Avery appear in my room by herself with a strained expression on her face, apologizing. But I was wrong.

"Hello Iris", Sandeep said, entering my room pushed by a nurse on a wheelchair

I tried to pull myself up on the bed, but when I did I realized that I didn't have enough strength for that. It was odd, it seemed like I was living in one of those dreams where you want to walk but you can't, and you don't know why, and you feel your unease turn into a slowly rising panic.

"Here", the nurse said, seeing my struggle, and lifted the bed so that I sat in a semi-upright position

I thanked her, then said, looking at Sandeep, "You must tell me, I beg you"

"I will tell you whatever I know"

"Who did I kill?"

"Amy. Amy Turner"

I turned towards Avery. "Your daughter's baby-sitter"

She nodded slowly, and from her lack of reaction I sensed she had known all along, but had decided not to tell me.

“Why did you not speak to me? You knew this, didn’t you?”, I asked angrily

“Yes, I knew”

“Since when?”, I asked again, feeling cheated

“I had suspected this, but I wasn’t sure about it till recently. You suspected it too, but why did I have to make your fears worse by telling you that you were right?”

Why was I even blaming Avery considered what I had done?

I looked at Avery, then at Sandeep and finally at the room. I pondered the way each object looked, I listened to the blipping of the machine that recorded my heart beat, regular, then fast, then slow. I watched the fluid drip in my arm, and the arms of the watch spin. It all seemed strangely new to me, and oddly avulsed from the reality I knew, as if I recognized the shapes of the objects and the sounds but could not connect them to their functions and meanings.

Then Avery spoke, and pulled me out of the trance.

“Why did the “cleaning lady”, Donna Simpson, go after Iris rather than after Jonathan Woods?”, she asked Sandeep

“Joanna did take her revenge with Jonathan Woods”, Sandeep said

Avery bugged her eyes.

“But I had my colleagues verify, and Woods is still alive”

“Is he?”, asked Sandeep arching his brows

Avery tilted her head slightly. “Why are you surprised?”, she asked

“Because Donna told me she poisoned Woods with the same polymer that killed her sister. Donna didn’t want to kill him rapidly, she wanted him to learn what it meant to suffer. She hated him much more than Iris, she felt Iris should be killed as a preventive measure to avoid the production of other chemicals, rather than as a punishment. But she did want to punish Woods. She checked on him and told me he was in rough shape. Woods had an intuition of what happened, and was trying to find a cure for himself”, said Sandeep

Avery looked at Sandeep, then at me. “Did he find it the cure then? With whom was he working to find a it?”

“With a doctor from NY. I don’t know what they found, but if he is still around then maybe they did find something after all. Donna gave him a quite massive dose though, I’d be surprised if he made it”

“Were you involved in all this?”, Avery asked

“No, I wanted to stop these people, but not this way”

“What were you doing with Joanna Simpson and Ronny Davis the day we found you digging out the polymer in the middle of nowhere?”

“I told Iris before. Ronny discovered that Jonathan Woods had hidden samples there, we don’t know exactly why. He hid them after Donna had poisoned him, maybe to make sure he had a stock in case something happened in his lab...he was taking extra precautions. We were there to steal the sample for him. On my end I mainly wanted to make sure nobody else could get damage, Donna wanted to make sure Woods had no way out”, Sandeep said

Avery nodded with a pensive expression, as if things were starting to come together but some pieces of the puzzle were still missing

“You were never in contact with Mike Vanderbilt?, she asked

“Of course I was, he is the one who sent Iris over with her polymer”, he replied

“But was he involved in any of what happened afterwards?”, Avery insisted

“No...I wanted to speak to him for advice about it though, he is the person at FoodTech labs I trust the most. We have known each other for years. He never got back to me...but why? Don’t tell me that...”, he began

“I don’t think he can do anything dishonest, but...”, I started, and told him the facts as McMurrich had described them

“My boss found him hiding away some of the polymer, and after that he disappeared”, I explained

“Disappeared?”, Sandeep asked in disbelief

“Yes, he never went back to FoodTech labs and we cannot trace him. He might be innocent, but his behaviour tells a different story”, replied Avery

“So he is gone...but I am sure there is an explanation, although it is not an obvious one. Trust me, Mike is a clean man”

As clean as any of us can be at FoodTech labs, I thought. But I knew what he meant

“I trust him too”, I agreed

There was a pause, during which each of us was lost in separate thoughts.

“What I don’t understand is why you are in the hospital”, said Sandeep after a moment, looking at me
I smiled.

“Oh, I’ve had some of the polymer too”, I said casually

Sandeep pushed his head forward a bit, and started at me incredulously

“Deliberately?”

“No, the polymer is around. HealthyFood Inc is circulating it, isn’t that funny. HealthyFood...”, I laughed

“Is this true?”, he asked in consternation

“We’ve been trying to take back all the products additioned with the polymer, and we’ve opened an investigation on HealthyFood Inc.”, said Avery

I looked at her, but before I could ask she added, “This doesn’t mean something might not still be out there”

Sandeep sighted

“I need to go back to my room and lie down now”, he said

I pressed the call button near my bed

“I’ll come talk with you again”, told him Avery

“Yes, now that I’ve spoken to Iris...”, he started saying

“Why did you do this for me...why speak to me first, I mean?”, I interrupted

“I wanted to make sure you got the right information, not distorted second hand voices of what had really happened. It was not supposed to get to this point, and I know you didn’t intend it to”

“I don’t need comfort”, I replied, unnerved all of a sudden without knowing why

Sandeep seemed to sense my state of mind, because he added, “Iris, I know what you feel like because I also helped Woods to pursue his deviant purposes, indirectly”

“Thank you Sandeep”, Avery said as if he had been trying to reassure her instead of me

“Thank you”, I repeated, echoing her, my head devoid of thoughts

Chapter 100

When Sandeep left Avery said, “So we have another piece in the puzzle”

“One, not all of them”, I replied

Avery gave me a wondering look

"I have a friend journalist in NY"

Avery nodded, "Yes, you told me about what she found"

"Yes, right. So you recall that she was telling me about this doctor in NY...and about the dead patients"

Avery nodded again.

"We'll have to find out if Woods is with him, and if he is still alive. You know, if they found a cure...", Avery started

"I don't need their cure", I cut her off

"What were you saying about the trip in Italy?", she asked

"Well, that's different", I said defensively

"Sure it is. I want to know how you think to travel in your conditions, and what you want to achieve", she said with an edge in her voice

"I want to go there to find a cure for myself, possibly, and maybe help whoever else needs it – I want to have Mori help me make amend for the mess I've made", I said

"So why not see if someone else has the cure?"

"This someone else you're talking about is someone I don't want help from"

"But the others who might have eaten your polymer perhaps want to live, regardless of where the cure comes from", Avery objected, and I saw she had point there

I stopped to ponder. I was being selfish again, after all did I really care about others? Or was I just telling myself I did?

"Yes, you're right. Please do try to find out what they've come up with. But I will not use Woods cure, if he found one. I will still go to Italy and have Mori help, if he can help"

"Your childish black or white approach to reality is childish, do your realize this?", Avery replied stiffly

I shrugged, and as I did I felt self-conscious. That too – shrugging it off – was juvenile.

My cell rang, Avery looked at it, and I looked at it.

"Do you want to answer?", Avery said at last, passing it over to me

Jack. His name flashed on the screen.

"Hello...", I said

"I've spoken to Mori", Jack told me, with an exited pitch in his voice

“Yes”, I said

“Are you still ok with going?”, he asked, sensing my uncertainty

“Yes, oh yes. We were just talking about this with Avery”

“The detective is there?”

“Yes, and I spoke to Sandeep too”

“And?”

“And maybe the doctor who tested the MagnaSize on Amy is still alive, looking for a cure for himself”

“What?”

“The doctor who tested the MagnaSize on Amy has been poisoned with the same stuff, but apparently he is still alive and maybe he found a cure for himself”

“And you could use that cure...”, Jack whispered

“I could but I won’t”, I replied firmly

“But...”

“What did Mori say?”, I asked, cutting off his sentence

“That we can go as soon as we wish. I found a flight and spoke with a nurse who could assist us during the trip. I was just waiting for you to confirm before proceeding with the flight purchase”

“Sure...”

“Ok then, we can leave in a week if you feel ready”

“I feel ready”, I said

When I hang up Avery looked at me, shaking her head.

“Let me see what I can find out before you fly out”, she said, and left before I could add anything.

Chapter 101

It was Avery who drove us to the airport one week later. I had become thin – a bunch of bones – and I was too weak to walk. Jack pulled me out of the car and held me in his arms all the way from the parking to the upper floor, where we finally got a hold of a wheelchair.

“I’ll walk with you guys to the check-in”, Avery said

I felt she was wondering if and how I would make it to our destination

“We’ll be all right”, I said smiling, although I wasn’t sure myself what would happen.

But for some reason I was calm, happy, and almost euphoric. It was that distinctive type of euphoria that takes me when I am overly weak but not in pain, and I feel as if my body is freely floating in time and space.

“We should stroll around to use up some time”, I said, “we’ve got plenty on our hands”

The nurse Jack had hired looked at me with a surprised expression.

“We should try to save some energy for the trip”, she said

“We?”, I replied giggling, “Well, I am cozily sat on a wheelchair while you guys push me around, so unless *you* feel tired I’d like to see the duty free”

Everyone else was tense and instead of answering me Jack asked, almost talking to himself, “So where should we check-in?”

The summer was coming to an end, and the tourists about to return to their daily routine looked somewhat relieved to take a break from hotels, travels, but at the same time they were somewhat melancholic that the trip they had dreamed of was about to end.

From my privileged position on the wheelchair I could devote my undivided attention to the observation of the crowd of holiday migrants, without having to carry my luggage, walk or find my way around.

When we reached the check-in Avery bent and hugged me. It was a rushed hug, embarrassed and almost stolen, from which Avery released herself a second after touching me. That clumsy emotional hug was so unexpected, and I was touched.

“Hey”, I said

“Good luck, ok? I suppose it’s good that you go, since that damn Woods and that other doctor are nowhere to be found, nor is their cure, if they have one at all”, Avery told me, ending her sentence with an angry pitch in her tone

“Thank you, Mariam”, I said, meaning it

“We’ll call you when we get there”, Jack said

“Please do”

When Avery walked away I followed her with my eyes for as long as I could, till she got lost in the crowd

Seeing me stretch and crane my frail neck Jack said, “We must look forward now”

I must have given him a lost soul type of stare, because he said, “Come on, we’ll be back”

“Oh yes, and when...”, I started, but the voice of the woman at the check-in interrupted my sentence in mid-air.

“Can I help the next person in line?”, she called out

It was only then that I felt, for one brief moment, a sense of fear.

Chapter 102

I have vague memories of the rest of the trip. All I know is that I was falling in and out of sleep, and that I felt heavy headed and slightly nauseous whenever I was awake. I tried to keep my interactions with the outside minimal, to move as little as possible, to think as little as possible till I fell asleep again. I have a distinct recollection of a dream I had though. Strange how some details cling onto our memory and never fade.

I remember I was in a house, a very large one, with an antique flair to it. The house was Jack's and mine, and yet it could have been in many ways one of those museum houses, where objects are arranged so that the visitor lives into the momentary delusion that the last owner never left, and that either one has leaped back into the past or that – for some metaphysical reason – the arms of the house's clock have stopped ticking for few centuries. Although the house was mine I didn't fully know it, and as I moved into the different rooms I was caught into a suspended feeling of discovery. Two rooms especially fascinated me, but in those two particular rooms I was not allowed to enter. I had hastily peeked into one of them standing at the door, and I had seen a light hanging from the ceiling, a huge light with metal circles intertwined, in between which an old electric bulb shed a dim circle of light around. Seeing my intention of getting into the room, Jack had said, "No Iris, you cannot come in here". I had obediently backed up, although I couldn't understand his rationale for not letting me in there. I had left with the acute wish to see further, but without daring to ask any questions. I believe this dream continued – in and out – throughout the intermittent islands of sleep against which my shipwrecked body sloshed during the flight to the land of my ancestors. At a point I recall wondering if this would be my last flight, and I thought about the coincidence that I would end my life trying to reach the place where my family had originated. A sign? But then I fell asleep again, and tried – over and over again – to enter those rooms, each time stopping at Jack's words. "No Iris, you cannot come in here".

Then we landed and I woke up to a warm September day in Milan, where Mori was waiting for us at the airport.

Chapter 103

I will not forget Mori's face when he saw me. Happiness and consternation fought each other, altering his expression as his feelings swayed from one to the other.

He stood in front of the wheelchair looking at me in silence, and finally he said, "Iris".

Just that, but with a deep sense of compassion that I did not expect from someone who barely knew me.

I smiled, guessing at my devastated appearance and yet not sure about how much I had changed. It was then that I realized I had not looked at myself in the mirror since I had gone to the hospital.

"The trip was fine", I said, speaking with my same old voice.

Deep down I'm still who I've always been, I told myself, trying to hush the effect that Mori's shock reverberated on me.

"Ah well, if I didn't know what you have been going through I would wonder what they have been subjecting you to during the flight", he said, laughing at last

And I laughed too. "Ah, yes, these airlines are brutal, trust me", I teased, playing along

Mori laughed even harder, although what I said wasn't particularly funny. And so we found each other merrily giggling for no reason, with the nurse and Jack staring at us with stunned faces.

Then the mirth died off, and Mori cleared his voice, shaking off the last bits of laughter

"We should go to the hospital I suppose. I have an ambulance waiting for us outside", he said

"And oh, you can stay at stay at my place if you want", he added, addressing Jack

"Thank you, but I have a hotel room booked...", Jack answered

I knew he was torn between the fear of offending Mori by refusing his invitation, and his need of having his own private space

"Sure, I know you do, but in case your stay gets long...", Mori began, and did not end his sentence

Jack didn't answer, and after a pause Mori asked, "Shall we go then?"

I let Mori and Jack chat along, while I silently rejoiced at the aroma of coffee. I loved it, although it was not as smooth and intense as the when we had been out in the summer streets of Milan. That smell triggered something in me, it instilled within me the strong will to go out again in those streets, even if only for a day, but soon, today, now, no matter the consequences.

"I wish I could stay away from the hospital, just for a while...", I said, almost talking to myself

"We'll get you to walk outside on your own two feet, trust me", Mori said

"But for now...", he continued, and began pushing the wheelchair, "for now we'll have to stay inside for a while longer"

I looked around, and embraced the place swarming with Italian voices and with people dressed in the distinctly European fashion.

"I don't want to be cured, I just want to be part of life for a day. That's all", I said, before I could stop myself from spilling out the confession

"We've come all the way here cure you, Iris", Jack said

But have we?, I thought to myself.

"Ok, let's see if I can engage you with some science", Mori said

“Puaf, science...”, I replied, even though it was true that – in spite of everything – science still intrigued me.

I was curious to learn the biological and chemical mechanisms that were putting me in this state. How often could you study a phenomenon so closely as when you are affected by it the way I was?

“Why do you think you are unable to walk now?”, Mori asked, knowing that I was simulating my reaction

“Because I am too weak?”, I said, miming irony

“Yes, but why?”, he kept asking

“Because the polymer has convinced my cells to commit suicide?”, I replied on the same mocking note

“How have you come up with this answer?”, he asked, stopping short and walking in front of me to see my face

“I was just joking, I made it up...”, I began

“Just that?”

“Well, when we were looking at the cells it looked like they had become so numerous and yet they didn’t move...it seemed like they had multiplied like crazy and then died off, as if their biological and reproductive cycle had been accelerated, but then...”, I started and stopped, unable to continue

“But then, after having lived so intensely, the cells become unable to continue the life cycle. In other words the polymer acts as a delayed bomb, it does not affect the first, the second, or the third generation of cells, but beyond that it pulls the trigger and the cells become sterile, so to speak”, Mori concluded

“And you know what causes this?”, Jack asked

“And do you know how to reverse this problem?”, he continued with a tense eagerness in his voice, before getting an answer to the first question

“I do have suppositions about what causes this, as for knowing how to reverse this...I am not quite there yet”, he started and paused

“But I will get there, I will”, he said, mainly talking to himself now, pushing the wheelchair further, and at a faster pace.

Eight months later

The air is warm again after one of Milan's soggiest winters. Not that I really know how the winter was, but I was told so. The air in the hospital I lived in was climatized at a constant temperature of 25 °C, and the rooms were white and grey, mint clean, and perfectly illuminated by neon lights. Like the ones at FoodTech labs.

But now I am sitting at a table in a bar, in a street already swarming with cars and people at this early hour of the day.

"How's your cappuccino?", Mori asks

"Wonderful Mauro", I say, now that I call him by name

He smiles

"I'll be missing you tomorrow", I tell him

"I will too", he tells me, and stretches out his hand, laying it on mine

Tomorrow I will fly back to California, where Jack is waiting for me. He has been flying back and forth from the States to Europe, while I was slipping in and out of sleep in my hospital bed. He has been taking care of my apartment, making sure it would be there as I left it upon my return, although I'll pack my stuff and move on as soon as I'll get back. But I need to see the place one more time before I can move on. I wonder how it will feel like...

John told me that John Wheeler moved back to his old house with a new woman, the one I saw in the car back then, and with Wooster. So she really was his lover, I hadn't been wrong about this. I am happy things went this way, after all they didn't look like a great match, John and his ex-wife. But then, who am I to judge?

I've kept speaking with Avery, even after the trials where I was called as a witness, and to which, given my condition, I testified through a conference call rather than in person.

Mark Gill is in jail now, but his brother is still happily a big shot at Foodtech labs – or maybe not happily – but around nonetheless. Foodtech labs has gone through some trouble, but after all they found a way out.

HealthyFood Inc. has been also been under investigation. As far as I know someone there has been accused of negligence and got a fine – big but maybe not so big considered what was involved.

In addition to Jonathan Woods, other 21 people have died. Traces of the polymer were found in their bodies, but the medical reports recited, "Although adverse effects due to the intake of the chemical known as MagnaSize cannot be discounted, it is not possible to attribute the death of the patient to this substance with absolute certainty". I don't know if Dr. Alfred Bloomberg ever used my polymer in his

tests. His trial is still not over, but in the meanwhile he is still kicking around and, from what I hear, the institute is being very supportive with him.

Sandeep was charged with minor allegations. The judge assigned him to a penitentiary in California, from where he was supposed to leave after 3 months. Just about now. Something went wrong though. Nobody knows what really happened, but Avery thinks he was bullied. From my side I think he lost his way in life – just like me. Whatever the reason, he took his life. Let's respect the dead, no more speculations, please and thank you.

We never really knew what happened to Mike after he disappeared. He sent me a letter stamped from a postal office in Nebraska, which Jack found and read to me over the phone. "Iris, I was trying to find the truth. I couldn't. I am well and I wish you good luck. M.". That's all the letter said. I never understood what Mike really meant with that, except that he never intended to betray us. I wonder where he is and how he is making out in life. Something tells me he has become a nomadic homeless, but then who knows...one day we will meet again, maybe, and then he will tell me his story, and I will tell him mine. I like to think so, I hate losses.

Once upon a time I believed there was a logic in this world, a sort of justice that straightened out things at last. But is there? Just look at this story, does any part of it make sense to you? It all started as a game, but then the game became a crime. I thought I deserved punishment for my doings – perhaps I meant no harm, but it is the outcome that counts. I left a mess splattered on the floor, and walked away alive.

It is true though that my life will never be the same again. I desired death, and now I desire the man who saved me. I've fallen in love with Mauro, could you guess? I never had the guts to admit it till now, and again, only to these pages.

"What are you writing?", he asks me now, seeing me scribble these on my diary as I sip the cappuccino.

I smile

"Nothing...well, something. Maybe one day I'll show you", I say

I'll leave tomorrow, the idea pains me but I must. I love Jack too. How is this possible? I don't know, but then would you imagine that any of what happened is possible?

I am not sure what I'll do when I get back to California. Jack's opinion is that we should move to the east coast and start a new life. The past lives within us though. Is a new start truly possible?

I look up and lock my gaze onto Mauro's soft eyes, pitch black. The sun floods his face by half, while the umbrella casts an oblique shade on the other side of him.

Such is life: lights and shadows.

The day is beautiful and the moment intense, torn between joy and anticipation of longing. I blink, and during my blink I see myself crossing the desert in a car, a trailer hooked behind us with our belongings.

A new start, with our past right behind us, following closely. Blue sky, arid flatlands sprawled below the infinite horizon. I turn around and see Jack smiling on the passenger's seat.

I've made a mess out of my life, but I still don't want to let it go. Not in this bright day. I've corrupted myself, and yet, as I reopen my eyes and notice cappuccino's foam on Mauro's nose I laugh – and for this one instant my laughter is pure joy, uncorrupted happiness.